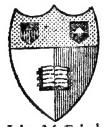
THE
TREASURY
OFFICER'S
WOOING

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## THE TREASURY-OFFICER'S WOOING

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# The Treasury-Officer's Wooing

BY



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#### CHAPTER I

For those endowed with the true genius for unsociability there are few places better suited for the free cultivation of that absorbing art than the headquarters of some of the more outlying subdivisions of Upper Burmah; and it may safely be said that there were, in the year of grace 1890, few who availed themselves of the facilities for seclusion afforded them in the interior of that newly annexed province more strenuously than did Rupert Waring, Assistant-Commissioner, late of the Burmah Police, whom fate, working through the medium of a paternal Government, had deposited two years prior to the

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events to be narrated on these pages, at Minmyo, a village on the river Chindwin, not far from the Manipur frontier.

Whatever may have been said in favour of this station (and that it had its compensations no one with an eye for beauty could deny), there had never been found a man with the hardihood to describe it as a delectable place of sojourn for individuals of a gregarious habit. Time was when there were three Europeans at Minmyo, when lawn-tennis was not unknown, and the skippers of the stern-wheelers used to regulate their runs so as to form the fourth at the weekly rubber in the miniature Subdivisional mess. But that was in the good old days immediately after the annexation, before quiet had been established throughout the greater part of the country, and while the gorges of the Chindwin still re-echoed to the bugle-call of regular troops. In process of time, when the bitterness of the British incursion had faded somewhat from the minds of the people of the land, and the odds in favour of a white man's being riddled with thumblengths of telegraph-wire if he showed himself unattended five miles from home, had dwindled to near the vanishing point, the Military were withdrawn from Minmyo, the tennis-court retired under a rank growth of weeds, and eventually the English Police-Inspector, the last companion in exile left to the Assistant-Commissioner, was replaced by a Burman head-constable with a redundant corporation and a character to retrieve. A fortnight after this transfer of officers had been effected, the Assistant-Commissioner attempted to commit suicide, fortunately without success (for he was ever an indifferent marksman) and must needs then (proceed to the headquarters of the district to report the matter, and to assure the Deputy-Commissioner that nothing on earth would persuade him

to live another day by himself in such a 'desolate God-forsaken hole' as Minmyo. His statement was ridiculed, but he stood firm, threatening resignation and defying the wrath of the powers that were; and Waring, who, at this juncture, had just left the Police for the Commission and was eating his heart out as Assistant-Magistrate in one of the seaport towns of Lower Burmah, had no difficulty in getting his urgent request to be sent to Minmyo granted. Thus it was that our friend was the sole European occupant of the stockaded fort at Minmyo on a certain day towards the end of November when he received by the weekly runner from headquarters a communication which may be looked upon as the first link in a (for him, memorable) chain of events.

The letter in question met his eye as he entered his office that morning at the commencement of his day's

work. In itself it was a very uninteresting-looking document, and the sight of it, as it lay on his table amid a heap of official missives, elicited from Waring nothing more than a petulant grunt. For what is known as a 'demiofficial,' or 'd-o,' from his Deputy-Commissioner ordinarily meant an enumeration of matters to which he was expected to devote his 'immediate personal attention' at his Subdivisional headquarters; and, with the cold weather in, our recluse was pining to quit the isolation of Minmyo for the still greater solitude of camp-life, and by no means appreciated the idea of having to defer his exodus merely to conduct some unprofitable enquiry or frame some futile report.

To the casual observer the Assistant-Commissioner did not present the appearance of the unsociable individual he was popularly supposed to be. In his eyes, as they wandered round the

bleak, dusty office, there was a kindly lustre, and his mouth, when it relaxed, as it did when he gazed away from the papers before him towards the blue river and the rustling tree-tops, had a lurking gleam of good fellowship in the corners. It was only when his heada close-cropped, determined head-was bent over his work, when his brow was contracted and his lips compressed under his straggling moustache, that he seemed to justify the imputation of unsociability. He certainly was frowning gloomily enough this morning when, after reading his other correspondence, he picked up his chief's letter, and, if anything, the furrows on his forehead deepened after he had grasped its contents. They were as follows:-

#### TATKIN, 21st November.

My DEAR WARING — The Commissioner thinks that, as you have not yet passed in Treasury, it would be best for you to come in to headquarters for a month or two to learn Treasury work. Stevens

will relieve you at Minmyo on Wednesday next. You had better come on down here as soon as possible after you have made over charge. Formal orders transferring you and Stevens will issue later, but please act in anticipation of them. I am sorry that you should have to turn out of Minmyo, where I know you are very happy, but, as you know, you've got to get the Treasury business through. I hardly think you will go back to Minmyo before your leave is due.—Yours sincerely,

J. B. SMART.

For a long time after he had gathered the substance of the letter Waring sat staring fixedly at the sheet he held in his hand; then he looked up and away, and for a further space allowed his eyes to rest on the view that was visible from below the flap of bamboo matting which served as a shelter and screen to the window, and now stood propped open at a convenient angle by a pole. Finally he rose, and, walking to the window, looked out, as though to take in to its utmost limits the prospect which stretched before his eyes. Certainly the 'God-forsaken hole' was, if a

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dungeon, a beautiful one. Far below, between the silver-grey trunks of the trees that clothed the hill on which the fort was built, glimpses could be caught of the thatched roofs and carved gables of Minmyo, dotted here and there amid the dark verdure that fringed the river's edge. On one side of the village was a broad expanse of rice-land, green and even as a billiard-table, bounded on the east by a thick belt of jungle, lifting tier on tier, in thicker and ever thicker masses, up the rising ground behind. Between the cultivated level and the jungle a row of snow-white pagodas gleamed, and hard by a smooth sheet of water gave back the azure of the November sky overhead. On the other side flowed the waters of the Chindwin, and beyond the steep sandy bank and tufted grass of the further shore the plain rolled away westward, with never a break, to the foot of the distant hills, a rugged blue chain, crested all along.

like a summer sea, with breakers of fleecy cloud. A narrow path, which showed here and there through the undergrowth on the hillside at his feet, marked the line of communication between the fort and the village below. Here it traversed the high river-bank near the landing-stage of the fort; further down it crossed a rough wooden bridge that spanned a little winding tributary of the main stream; and anon it disappeared through the stockade of teak logs into the village precincts. A very ordinary path it was, leading to a very ordinary Burmese hamlet, altogether a scene possessing no features that were not of common occurrence in the Province, but one which would have stirred to its depths the soul of many a man less open to Nature's appeals than Waring. To the hermit of Minmyo every detail of the landscape was as well known and as well loved as a two years' residence in the place could render

it. Who so well as he could tell where exactly the different villages of his charge,—their presence barely indicated by the shimmer of a pagoda, or the sparkle on the roof of a monasterynestled on the plain? Where it was that the high-sterned boats and bamboo rafts lay by his own village in the dry weather, and where they clustered during the rains? In what directions the best snipe-grounds stretched, and at precisely what spot, far down on the river, the weekly steamer from civilisation below was first to be looked for, a black speck crawling on the shining water? For him, as for the sage of Weissnichtwo, it was true sublimity to dwell on high and from his watch-tower in the fort, as from the attic of the Wahagasse, to see a portion, at least, of the 'placid life-circulation' of his own Subdivision. Here alone he was really happy.

And now he was to leave all this

behind him, in all probability never to return. His successor, Stevens, a young civilian with a soul that soared above meagre arithmetical details, had, he knew well, not been successful as a Treasury-Officer; and our exile felt pretty sure that, once down at Tatkin, some pretext or other would be found for keeping him at District headquarters till he went on leave in March. As the certainty that he was shortly to bid a long farewell to his first independent charge grew slowly upon him, he found himself wondering whether among his predecessors there had been a single one who had truly regretted leaving Minmyo for good. Not one, he was sure, and yet for him, though none of his friends would have believed it, the parting from the place, where in solitude he had mused away so many happy hours, was tinged with real regret. In Minmyo he had found those restful tranquil surroundings that

elsewhere he had ever looked for in vain; and as he stood there, gazing over the sunlit prospect, the idea of Tatkin and semi-civilisation seemed anything but alluring. Tatkin meant polo and lawn-tennis and whist, and to these he had no objection; but it also meant the distracting presence of two ladies, if not three (for he remembered now that Smart, or one of the other men, had got a sister stopping with him), and from the thought of female society Waring recoiled with all the horror of a celibate recluse. 'If it were not for the women,' he said to himself, 'it would not be so bad.' But as it was, it really was rather hard having to turn out like this.

But there was no use repining. The work of the day had to be done, whether this was to be his last week in Minmyo or not. He collected himself with an effort, and, withdrawing his gaze from the distant hill-tops,

brought his eyes and mind to bear on his more immediate surroundings. He moved to another window and looked out into the fort-enclosure. Near the court-house, in the centre of the sunny open space that lay between it and the stockade, squatted three despondent Burmans handcuffed, with leg-irons round their dusty ankles. Behind them, in the protecting shade of the bamboo barracks, lounged two Sikh policemen with fixed bayonets, chatting in a husky undertone, while a third stood at ease beside them, half in and half out of the sun, with a white, watchful eye on the three prisoners. As they observed the gaze of the Assistant - Commissioner fixed them, the guard stood to attention with that deprecating air of self-consciousness that always characterises a native of India when he suddenly finds himself the object of a European's interest. Waring turned to his headclerk, a thin, hollow-cheeked Arakanese, who had entered the office and now stood by his side with a bundle of papers for signature.

'Are those the Gyobin dacoits out there?' he asked, indicating with a finger the three delinquents who hung their heads before the Magistrate's regard and fidgeted with their fetters.

'Yes, your Honour. Your Honour fixed to-day for the case.'

'Have all the witnesses come?'

'Yes, your Honour; only two not yet arrived.'

'Where are they? Why haven't they come? They had summonses to attend and give evidence, hadn't they?'

'Yes, your Honour; but Gyobin headman reports that he was unable to find them this morning at the time he collected the witnesses. He considers that, through fear, they have run away.'

'Oh, he considers so, does he? Well, send him straight back to

Gyobin and tell him that if he doesn't turn up with those witnesses some time this afternoon, he will have to look out for squalls. Trot out those that are here. I will try the case to-day.'

'But, your Honour,' pleaded the clerk, 'it is ten miles to Gyobin and----'

'All the more reason that he should directly,' rejoined the stern Assistant - Commissioner. 'Tell him what I said;' and ten minutes later the prisoners had been marched into the office, the headman of Gyobin had left at a hurried double for his village, and Waring had forgotten all about his impending transfer from Minmyo in the task of eliciting facts, relevant and irrelevant, from an exceedingly agitated but stubborn Burmese dame, the principal witness in the dacoity case he was committing to Sessions, who was making a gallant effort to reconcile her instant recognition of the prisoners as three of the men who had pulled her hair and taken her rupees, with the damaging fact that (according to her own and her husband's admission) she had kept her face glued to the bamboo flooring and had never once dared to look up at the dacoits during their unwelcome visit.

Ten days later Waring had left Minmyo for good.

#### CHAPTER II

THE sun had set in a crimson halo of cloud, and polo was just over at Tatkin. The players were lying in the long armchairs that thrice a week fringed the margin of the polo-ground, discussing the good points of their own and the bad of their companion's play, while they regaled themselves with whisky and soda-water and cheroots, and Waring, with his booted feet almost on a level with his head and an irreproachable Trichinopoly cigar between his teeth, had for the past five minutes been assuring himself that existence at Tatkin was, after all, likely to be a good deal more tolerable than he had expected. He had arrived about noon

of the same day, and it must therefore be admitted that his prospective appreciation of the good things that a just and discerning providence had in store for him at the District headquarters was based more on a consciousness of the merits that were to earn their due reward than on any actual personal experience; but this fact did not render him any the less certain that it would require no very great effort to enable him to enjoy himself at Tatkin reasonably well. His duties, so far, had consisted in reporting his arrival to the Deputy-Commissioner, who, in the throes of his monthly statements, seemed to Waring to grudge the ten minutes' interview that the fitness of things required of him, and hurried on impatiently to his final exhortation, which was to proceed to the Treasury as early as possible and try to get some order into the chaos that Stevens had, with a thoughtful perception of the

weakness of new brooms for hard work, left behind him. It was to his predecessor at Tatkin and his successor at Minmyo that Waring's thoughts had now wandered, and his musings evidently aroused humorous memories, for a gleam of laughter that passed across his face, as he lay back silent in his chair, attracted the attention of Mullintosh, the Policeman, who was reclining next to him, his rubicund face shining with a steady radiancy through the fast gathering twilight.

'Now then, Grumpy,' the latter asked, heaving his huge body slowly round in his chair, 'what are you laughing at? Keeping your jokes to yourself as usual, I see. Minmyo doesn't seem to have loosened that tongue of yours.'

'I was thinking,' said Waring, with his eyes fixed on the western glow, 'of Stevens's face as I left him standing on the bank at Minmyo this morning.

Poor beggar, he was just the picture of misery. 'Pon my soul, I really thought he was going to cry; he looked so utterly desolate and lost perched up there on the bank under the policestation in the middle of the crowd of jabbering Burmans.'

'Ah, to be sure,' said Mullintosh. 'Welsh told me all about it when I came down to the boat to meet you. Did you hear that, you chaps?' he continued, turning to his neighbours. 'It must have been the rarest fun. "When shall I see you again, skipper?" shouts out young Stevens as they were putting off from the bank. "Next week, I suppose." "Don't you be too bloomin' sure, my son," bellows Welsh back. "Snags between here and Tatkin are terrible bad, as you know, and that Minywa crossing is filling up as fast as fast. May do another run or two with luck before the water falls, but don't you fret your gizzard if you

don't see me for another six months." "Great Scott!" shouts Stevens, staring like a stuck pig out of the boat. "You're not going to leave me here all the cold weather by myself!" "That's about the size of it," yells Welsh, just as they got out of hearing; I never saw the old sinner so pleased in my life before. He swears he could see Stevens's white face on the bank when they turned the corner three miles down the river.'

'We shall have him down here overland before the month is over,' said Sparrow, the Engineer, 'on his knees to Smart praying to be taken away. It'll be a case of Trumble over again, you see. How you managed to stand it so long, Waring, I can't imagine. They really ought to send another European up there.'

'So they're going to,' observed Smart, the Deputy-Commissioner, from the depths of his chair. 'I spoke about it the other day to Colonel Davys, and he said he'd see that a European Inspector was posted there without delay. Stevens knew that right enough, for I told him before he left. Friend Welsh must have been romancing.'

'A European Inspector, dear me, to think of that! Nice society for you when you go back, Waring,' said Heriot, the Forest-Officer, gazing serenely at the sky through his single eye-glass. He was a gaunt man, with a clean-cut, regular face and a sprinkling of grey in his dark hair. 'To think of that!' he repeated softly. 'Double dummy whenever you feel so inclined, and somebody to argue with and confute when you have one of your loquacious seizures on. You will like that, dear boy, won't you?'

'You bet,' grunted the unsociable one, whose love of a rubber was as much a byword as his taciturnity, and a chorus of laughter was going

round the chairs when the ladies of the Station appeared on the scene and brought the men to their feet. At their approach the habitual whistplayers detached themselves from the throng and edged away, murmuring confidentially, to the club-house. Waring observed the manœuvre and for a moment was tempted to fly with these kindred spirits; but, as he wavered, the consciousness came over him that some notable act was expected of him on his first day at Tatkin, and he decided to stop and face the fiery ordeal, which he reflected would have to be undergone in any case, sooner or later. Two of the three newcomers he knew. Of Mrs. Sparrow, a large husky lady several years older than her gentle spouse, he preserved a vivid recollection; and his acquaintance with Mrs. Jones, a cheerful, black-eyed daughter of the country, who had recently been led to the altar

by a serious young Inspector of Police, was of several years' standing. The third lady he had never seen before, but even had he not just learned that Smart's sister was staying with him, he would have had no difficulty in recognising her by the likeness she bore to her brother, who had just tramped solemnly off at the head of the whist-players. She had not his exceedingly retroussé nose, but the eyes and mouth (which were not Smart's worst features) were, as Waring had leisure during the next few minutes to observe, identical in brother and sister; and the way in which she carried her neat little, well-poised head, on which Smart's ruddy locks were reproduced in a chastened shade of auburn, reminded him to the life of the sturdy Deputy-Commissioner. It seemed to Waring, as he took her slowly in, that this was certainly a personable young woman, and the

general impression conveyed by her dainty exterior was quite in keeping with the other unexpectedly pleasurable sensations he had been experiencing since his arrival in Tatkin. He felt inclined to attribute his feelings, so far as Miss Smart was concerned, to his protracted absence from the softening influence of feminine intercourse; but at the same time he could not blind himself to the fact that the other ladies of the Station were in his eyes every whit as uninteresting, and appealed to him as little, as when he had seen them last, two or three months before; and this knowledge so impressed him that he took the earliest opportunity of asking Mrs. Jones, near whom he found himself standing, to introduce him to the Deputy-Commissioner's sister.

'Fancy your wanting to be introduced to anybody, Mr. Waring; this is something quite new,' giggled the dusky lady. However she performed the ceremony of introduction readily enough. 'Miss Smart,' she said. 'Let me introduce to you Mr. Waring, the gentleman who has just arrived from Minmyo.'

Miss Smart looked with a shy kindly smile towards the gentleman who had just arrived from Minmyo. She was sitting between Mullintosh and Heriot, listening with a meek resignation to the Police-Officer's vociferous utterances, and seemed glad enough of a diversion.

'How do you do, Mr. Waring?' she said. 'Won't you come and sit down here?' and she pointed to an unoccupied seat opposite her. 'You arrived this morning, I believe, didn't you? You must find this a great change after Minmyo.'

'A very great change,' said Waring, taking the proffered chair; 'and a very pleasant one,' he added. A minute before the poor recluse had felt fountains

of small talk spouting up within him, but now that he was placed in the sight of all beholders near the Deputy-Commissioner's sister, every conceivable topic of conversation faded treacherously from his mind, and, to his dismay, he found himself staring hard at his boots with never a word to say, and with a terrible tingling perception that the assembled company, marvelling at this unparalleled outburst of sociability on his part, were hanging on his lips. Through all, however, asserted itself a feeling that he could not possibly be less in his element than Heriot, who had hitherto been, like himself, consistent in his strict avoidance of ladies' society. It was a relief to him to find that Mullintosh was quite prepared to carry on the thread of conversation.

'Don't you believe him, Miss Smart,' the Policeman was exclaiming. 'He would go back to Minmyo to-morrow if he could. He's going to get a grant of land and settle down there when he retires.'

'Is it such a delightful place, then?' asked Miss Smart.

'Oh, it's not so bad when you're there,' said Waring, still regarding his boots; 'wonderfully pretty and picturesque and all that, and not so very unhealthy at this time of year, but lonely of course.'

'I've never been there,' observed the Deputy-Commissioner's sister. 'Of course I haven't had time yet to do more than see one or two places near here; but Jack promised to take me to Minmyo during the cold weather. I should so much like to see how Mr. Stevens gets on up there. I can't imagine him by himself, poor young man, in a lonely District.'

'Subdivision,' corrected Mrs. Jones.

'Oh, Subdivision, is it? I never can distinguish between Districts and

Subdivisions and Divisions. They all seem much the same to me.'

'They're all different names for exactly the same thing really,' said Mullintosh. 'You pays your money and you takes your choice. You'll have to go up with the Deputy-Commissioner Sahib and cheer Stevens up, Miss Smart. He's terribly down in his luck, whatever your brother may say to the contrary.'

'I should love to see the place,' said the young lady addressed.

'Well, Miss Smart,' drawled Heriot, 'if I were you, and intended visiting Minmyo, I should send our poor young man timely notice, so that if, like some of his predecessors, he has designs on his own life, he may stay his hand till after you have been there.'

'What do you mean? Don't be horrid! You don't really mean say----'

'I mean to say,' said Heriot, fixing

his eye-glass with bland deliberation, 'that the last man at Minmyo tried to —well—in fact, tried to make two young men happy.'

'What two young men?'

'The men below him in the gradation list. It was his first year; there were only two.'

'You mean that he tried to commit suicide?'

'Exactly, but failed. Nice young man he was too, but never could succeed in anything he put his hand to. He's Treasury-Officer in Tenasserim somewhere now.'

'I don't believe you,' exclaimed Ethel. 'Is that true, Mr. Waring?' she added, addressing the new arrival. 'I never know when Mr. Heriot is speaking the truth.'

'Perfectly true,' Waring made answer.

'But—weren't you the last? I mean—it wasn't you, was it?'

'Of course it was,' put in the irrepressible Mullintosh. 'You can see the white scar under his chin still where he tried to cut his throat,' and he pointed with a tragic gesture towards Waring, while Heriot lay back in his chair and polished his eyeglass deprecatingly. He was a trifle short-sighted and the joke was lost upon him.

'Nonsense!' exclaimed Ethel; that's the mark of Mr. Waring's chinstrap, where the sun hasn't burnt him. What do you all mean?'

'It was my predecessor,' said Waring; 'a young chap fresh out from home. The solitude preyed on his mind, and——'

Miss Smart gave a little shudder. 'Don't talk about it, please,' she said. 'But you say he didn't succeed?'

- 'No, he failed.'
- 'How dreadful!'
- 'Quite true,' said Heriot solemnly.

'Really, when one considers that Trumble was an able-bodied man, and had a second-class dispensary and a whole battery of small arms at his disposal, *dreadful* is the only word one can use. One begins to despair of——'

'Reminds one of the old story about the duel between the Englishman and the Frenchman,' said Mullintosh. 'You've heard it, I suppose, Miss Smart? The one who threw lowest with the dice was to blow out his brains; Frenchman loses,—goes out of room,—sound of shot heard——you must know the story; Frenchman comes back presently and apologises. "Pardon," he says; "I have had ze misfortune to miss myself."'

'You've no right to joke about so serious a matter,' exclaimed Miss Smart. 'It's very wrong, Mr. Heriot,' and she turned indignantly to the individual named, who, with his eye-glass focussed and his head slightly on one

side, was carefully scrutinising an imaginary crack in his polo-stick.

'My dear Miss Smart,' he replied, 'far be it from me to joke about anything so serious. I am as concerned as you are yourself at Mr. Mullintosh's flippancy.'

'Oh, you are quite incorrigible; you can talk nothing but nonsense to-day,' cried the girl, rising as in desperation, though her mouth twitched indulgently. 'Mrs. Sparrow, do you feel inclined to come to the club and look at the papers?'

And they all with one accord rose and wandered slowly towards the rickety bamboo shanty that did duty as a club at Tatkin. As they fared over the hard sun-dried turf Waring felt his arm grasped by Mullintosh, and the two fell back into the rear of the party.

'Easy on, old man,' exclaimed the Policeman. 'I'm as stiff as a poker after the polo, and that old wound in my leg is bothering me again. I can't walk as fast as these young things; give me an arm, will you?'

They dropped behind, and presently Mullintosh thrust his red face up to Waring's. 'Do you see 'em?' he asked with a chuckle, indicating by a motion of his head Miss Smart, who, despite her invitation to Mrs. Sparrow, was walking apart both from that lady and the rest of the little company, with Heriot by her side.

- 'Yes,' said Waring.
- 'Come out, hasn't he, since you saw him last?'
  - 'Perhaps.'
- 'Sweet on him as she can be,' pursued the Policeman inconsequently.
  - 'Is she?'
- 'Yes; you must have noticed it. Lazy sarcastic beast, doesn't care a bit for her, I can see. Funny, for she's not a bad 'un, take her all round.'

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- 'Ah!' said Waring.
- 'Not a little bit. Funny go, altogether.'
  - 'Oh!' said Waring.

## CHAPTER III

IT generally surprises the reflective traveller, for whose information life up-country has been exhaustively summed up in Rangoon as an existence wholly devoid of material comforts, to learn, on penetrating northward, what degrees of up-countriness there are, and how much everything, even in the more remote and outlandish tracts of Upper Burmah, goes by comparison. This knowledge is anything but new to the residents of the interior. Those who have sat on a camp-stool and eaten off the lid of an office-box for a month together, understand what it is to look upon a table, even when guiltless of a cloth,

as almost a luxury, and an easy chair, though of the roughest, as savouring of voluptuousness; but even for the habitual dweller in the wilderness the ample variation in the standards of comfort up-country brings with it at times a sort of mild surprise. Fastidious lowlanders, fresh from the delights and dissipations of Rangoon, were wont to scoff not a little at the sight of the unkempt exterior of the Tatkin club; yet it seemed to Waring, even while he clambered the rickety stair to the verandah and saw the undulations of the floor quiver before him, that the building was an amazingly respectable erection, and he could only marvel now that he should ever have regarded it so slightingly as he did on his first arrival from Lower Burmah. Mullintosh still hung heavily on his arm as he followed on the skirts of the little party from the polo-ground, and, when the club was reached, was not long in guiding his

footsteps to the bar, behind which two dingy Madrassis in faded raiment flitted to and fro, sustaining with whisky and soda-water and dubious cocktails the male portion of the community. The tropical night had set swiftly in, and the whitewashed walls, lit up but meagrely by a poor half-dozen lamps, were yet bright and enticing after the outer gloom. Those of the men who were not playing whist were for the most part grouped in the proximity of the bar, engaged in desultory talk. Beyond them, in the little readingroom, the ladies, with a few of their immediate followers, might have been seen gathered round a wooden table littered with a wealth of periodicals, for the most part illustrated, of ancient date. At these a casual glance was from time to time thrown; but here, snatches of conversation, rather more subdued, though in nowise less animated than in the quarter monopolised by the men, was a sign to the initiated that the weekly mail, with its budget of newspapers, had not yet arrived. Heriot was there, still at Miss Smart's elbow, and the recollection of Mullintosh's words, as they were on their way to the club, invested Waring's gaze in the direction of the couple in the reading - room with newly - awakened interest. To the average observer it would certainly have seemed as though what the Policeman had said about the girl was true. She was sitting at the table, playing listlessly with the leaves of The Graphic, on which her gaze was bent; but though her eyes were on the printed page her mind was elsewhere, for at each fresh remark of Heriot's there was a light on her face, brighter than any that the lamps could cast. Even Waring, unskilled as he was to read the subtle language of the lip and eye, could see that every word that issued from the mouth of the keen-

faced man who sat, tenderly stroking his riding-boots, at her side was more to Miss Smart than she would probably have cared to confess. Whether or not Heriot justified the strictures indulged in by Mullintosh in his regard it was impossible for Waring to say. It was clear that though he made no effort to cultivate it, he did not dislike the girl's society; but beyond this nothing could have been divined of his feelings and thoughts by a judge far more astute than the new arrival from Minmyo. Waring's essay to plumb the depths of the Forest-Officer's impassive face failed utterly, and as he turned his puzzled gaze away he caught Mullintosh's eye, which was momentarily obscured by a wink of profound comprehension. burly Policeman had seated himself at a small round table close to the bar with a long tumbler in front of him, and had also been looking at the enigmatic pair. He raised his glass to

Waring as a gleam of intelligence shot across the latter's face, and as he replaced it empty on the table, winked again with even more meaning than before.

The Treasury-Officer turned away, with an involuntary smile, to Sparrow, and at the request of that admirable officer plunged into a description of the state of the Minmyo village bridge, which had been built a few years before by local labour and at an absurdly low rate under the supervision of the headman, and had, in the opinion of pitying experts, been in a parlous condition for the past six months. The Executive Engineer, who had a fine professional contempt for the structure, and would only refer to it in compassionate 'demi-officials' and in casual conversation at the club, had had the materials for a noble Departmental bridge on his hands for nearly a year, and was a trifle perturbed to learn from

Waring what vitality the existing erection still possessed. Disappointed in this regard, he soon guided the conversation with unofficial directness to other more promising non-Departmental works in the Subdivision, and presently Waring found that the first rubber was over and that Smart had joined them from the whist-room.

'Dine with us to-night, Waring, will you?' said the Deputy-Commissioner. 'Eight o'clock sharp,' and his invitation having been accepted with almost equal brevity, he passed on briskly into the reading-room, and in a minute or two had gathered his sister to him and departed, a sturdy, strenuous figure, into the darkness.

Heriot rose languidly as his fair companion was swept away and approached the bar, after a deliberate survey through his glass of the company assembled. He stopped in front of Waring and looked at him for a moment in silence. 'Have

another drink, Waring?' he said presently. 'No? Well, come and dress for dinner, then.'

- 'I'm dining at Smart's this evening,' replied Waring.
- 'I know; I heard Smart say so. I'm dining there myself to-night, and I was told to see that you were not late.'
- 'Why should they think I was going to be late?'
- 'I told them you would be. I said you hadn't unpacked or settled down yet.'
- 'I like your cheek. My boy is unpacking now; I shall be ready as soon as you are, you see. Come along.'
- 'Where are you sneaking off to, Waring?' exclaimed Mullintosh as the two, on their way to the door, passed him at his table.
  - 'I'm off to dress for dinner.'
- 'Rubbish! You've heaps of time still. Dinner's not till a quarter past

eight. You must have another gin and bitters before you go.'

'I'm dining with Smart,' explained Waring.

'Oh, you are, are you? Then go, my son, in peace, and try and behave yourself. Is Heriot dining there too?'

'Yes.'

'You don't say so! No fun for you then. Take care of him, and don't let him stop too long.'

'Fine delicately-minded individual that,' observed Heriot grimly as the two stepped out of the club, and no further word was spoken until they reached the Civil Mess, which housed under its sombre shingled roof nearly the whole of the bachelor portion of the little community.

It has been asserted, by those in India who are qualified to form an opinion, that a transfer from one Station to another is ordinarily as disastrous, from a pecuniary point of view, as a fire; and in the case of married officers, and of those of the unmarried to whom real comfort is essential, there is a good deal of truth in the assertion. For the average bachelor in the East, however, a move does not usually have so calamitous an effect. Certainly there was nothing in Waring's rooms to show that his transfer was at all likely to prejudice him financially. His quarters in the Civil Mess consisted of two rooms, an office in front, and a bedroom behind. In the former stood a solid teak-wood table, covered with a gaudy native cloth, two of a trio of rickety, unvarnished, cane-bottomed chairs, a rattan lounge, and a bookcase. The centre of the back room was occupied by a campbedstead, decked with well-patched mosquito-curtains and flanked by the third of the chairs, equally with the others in an advanced state of decrepitude. The blank teak face of one of the bedroom walls was partly hidden by a jailmade wardrobe, and close to this straddled a collapsible washing-stand. Beyond this the quarters were bare of furniture. The bed, washing-stand, and lounge Waring had brought with him from Minmyo, and they had formed a modest load for the single able-bodied cooly who had carried them up from the steamer. The balance of the fittings he had purchased for the sum of thirty rupees from Stevens, to whom he had made over all his non-portable belongings at Minmyo for a sum slightly in excess of the above.

A smoky wall-lamp was burning in the bedroom when Waring entered, to find his boy, a sleek shifty Madrassi, resplendent in a scarlet and gold puggree, emptying his boxes of their contents, already knee-deep in a welter of kharki clothing, flannel shirts, cigars, enamelled ironware and books, from which some kind genius had prompted him to extract the wherewithal to array his master for

dinner; and in a reasonably short space of time Waring was ready.

On strolling round to Heriot's quarters in order to show that his unpacking had not interfered with his dressing, he found the owner lying at full length on his camp-bed, being shampooed by one of his Burman boys, while the other was languidly inserting a set of gold studs in a white shirt, stopping every now and then to indulge in a furtive puff at a fat white cheroot that lay on the floor beside him.

'Not time to start yet,' observed Heriot, slowly opening his eyes as Waring bore down upon him from his office. 'Ten minutes more and I'll be ready. That'll do, Shwe Hlaw. Now then, Po San, give me that shirt, if you've quite finished pawing it about. Throw that cheroot away, you fool; you'll be dirtying the front. Sit down, Waring; I'll be ready in a moment.'

Waring did not sit down, but prowled

silently about the room with his hands in his waistcoat pockets (he was not used to waistcoats) while Heriot's toilet was being completed, glancing now at the two Burmans as they struggled with their master's raiment, now at the nicknacks that decorated the walls and tables. There was an air of comfort about the room which contrasted strongly with the bareness he had left behind him at the farther end of the mess-house. The furniture was better in quality than what is ordinarily met with in bachelors' quarters in Upper Burmah. There were dhurries on the plank floor and a picture or two on the walls; a trophy of red-tufted Chin spears hung near the door, which was draped with a brilliant green and yellow Indian purdah, and the dressing-table and a writingtable near the window were covered with photographs of young men and maidens, the latter preponderating. It was before one of these last that Waring stopped, after a short perambulation, to give vent to the first remark that he had vouchsafed since he entered the room. Heriot's head was in his shirt when Waring spoke, his arms were working convulsively, and he had to have the question repeated to him after he had emerged rustling.

'I asked you who that was,' said Waring. He pointed, as he spoke, to the portrait which had attracted his attention. It was the photograph of a delicately-featured girl with fine eyes, a weak mouth, and an exquisite neck, which showed to advantage against a dark background and a still darker evening-dress.

Heriot wrestled awhile in silence with a stubborn neck-stud. 'It is a Miss Dudley Devant,' he said presently. 'Po San, my white tie. How often have I told you, you yellow-faced baboon, that you're not to keep your private store of *pice* in my collar-box? Take them away.'

'Dudley Devant,' said Waring musingly; 'where have I heard that name recently?' But Heriot made no attempt to help him, and he was left to ransack the recesses of his memory in vain. It could hardly, he pondered, have been mentioned to him at Minmyo. He had seen no one there to speak of, for months, and he could recall the details of all the conversations he had had there in which the name of the girl with the long white neck could possibly have occurred. Nor had any one referred to it in his presence since his arrival at Tatkin. And yet for all that before his eyes stood the words Dudley Devant, Muriel—No-Millicent Dudley Devant. He was certain now that he had seen them before,—seen them, not heard them. It might have been in a newspaper; it must have been, - and

Heriot slipped into his coat, and the two descended the steps and strolled across to where the lights of the Deputy-Commissioner's bungalow shone in the distance. The air was warm and still; the new moon was setting dreamily down behind the dark line of western hills, and the whole atmosphere throbbed with the melody of the cicadas. One of Heriot's Burman boys was plodding in front of them along the dusty track swinging a hurricane-lantern, the light from which shone fitfully on the black and white of their evening-dress, assumed in Miss Smart's honour.

'Not Millicent Dudley Devant,' said Waring suddenly.

'To be sure,' said Heriot; and then after a pause he added, 'How the devil did you know?'

But Waring could not enlighten him. V 1/1

## CHAPTER IV

THEY were four at dinner that evening at the Smarts'. To Waring the meal was, after his solitary, ill-prepared repasts at Minmyo, nothing short of a revelation. The spotless cloth (such a cloth as he had not seen for months) shone in his eyes like driven snow; the silver Burmese bowl that did duty as a centre-piece glittered with all the splendour of a cloudless moon; and even the atrocious decorations perpetrated by the Indian servants, a magenta and orange pattern of sprinkled flower petals that sprawled across the table, failed to dissipate the glamour that had been cast for him over the whole dining-room. He took the Deputy-Commissioner's sister in, and,

as the guest of the evening, found himself the somewhat embarrassed object of a good deal of kindly attention at the hands of his host and hostess. He was not long in perceiving that Heriot was already quite at home in the house, exhibiting a surprising readiness to be looked upon as a friend of the family, and, as such, to partially efface himself for the time being. Neither the Forest-Officer nor Smart spoke much; they were content to let the lion's share of the conversation go to Ethel, who had been apprised of her guest's peculiarities and did her best to draw him out of his shell and interest him. It cannot be said that the conversation during dinner was intrinsically interesting or elevating; in Tatkin it never soared very high, and perhaps the Tatkinites were not altogether to blame, poor folk, for their poverty of topics. Englishmen in the East are often found fault with for caring nothing about what is going

forward in their mother-country, and for thinking and talking of nothing but their own petty occupations and amusements: and the censure is too often justly deserved. Yet no one who has not lived up-country in India or Burmah can form an idea of the constant effort it is for those who, for six days out of the seven, are utterly cut off from the outside world, to keep alive an interest in matters that lie, be it ever so little, beyond their daily, mechanical round. A want of catholic sympathy with the affairs of mankind at large has been known to exist even in individuals who are brought in daily touch with the broader things of life; and it is perhaps hardly to be wondered at that they should grow narrow and self-centred who are reminded but once in every week, by the English mail, that there is a living acting world outside the limits of their own little official one. It is with regret that I have to record

that the talk at the Smarts' dinnertable on the evening in question was lamentably provincial and ephemeral, and that not a subject was touched upon that would not have bored a stranger unacquainted with the speaker's circle; yet, after all, the defects of the new tennis-court and the question of organising a Tatkin 'week' were topics as harmless, and possibly as instructive, as the majority of those that must, a few hours later, have engaged the attention of the enlightened guests at British dinner-tables.

The stream of conversation flowed on in the same strictly local channels after the cloth had been cleared and the three men were sitting smoking round the board, guiltless now of orange and magenta; while Ethel, who, by special request, had not quitted them for the solitary drawing-room, was initiating her guests into the mysteries of coffeemaking, with practical illustrations given with the aid of a block-tin coffee-pot.

- 'I always like making my own coffee,' she explained, after the beverage had been brewed, and had found favour on the palate even of the fastidious Heriot. 'These native servants are wonderfully clever,' she added, 'but there is one thing I find they cannot manage to do properly, and that is, to make coffee. They always put in too little coffee, and pour the water in too quickly. Lots of coffee and really boiling water poured on drop by drop,—that's the secret. My brother is very particular about his coffee, you know, so I always see to it myself.'
- 'And send me out on expeditions with it,' groaned Smart.
- 'What? Oh yes,—I suppose you have not heard, Mr. Waring. It was just as I was making coffee after dinner the other day that we heard about the big dacoity at—at—.'

'Thayetbin,' put in Smart.

'Thayetbin, was it? I daresay. Well, Jack wanted to be off after the dacoits immediately, and I was determined that he should not miss his coffee; so I filled his flask with some freshly made and slipped it into his pocket, just as he was jumping on to his pony. He was terribly cross about it when he came home.'

'Naturally,' said Smart, blowing a long white cloud and knocking his ashes into his plate. 'Mullintosh and I were out after the beasts the whole night. About four in the morning, when we were on our way home, I suddenly remembered my flask. "By Jove," said I, "now for a nip to keep the cold out," so out it came.'

'The cold?' asked Heriot, striking a match.

'The flask of course,—out it came, and I slowed down my pony, so as to have a good suck. Heavens! I can feel the shiver now that ran down my back at the first mouthful.'

'It was much better for you than whisky,' laughed his sister.

'Infinitely,' added Heriot who was lighting a cigarette. 'Most thoughtful of you, Miss Smart, to prevent them coming home unduly elated. I remember now,—they captured a prisoner that night, and were horribly pleased with themselves when they got back. If that flask had contained whisky, I'm sure they'd have been insufferable.'

'You think so, do you?' said Smart. 'Well, I was insufferable enough, at the time, I can assure you. I wasn't happy till I had made Mullintosh, who was riding just behind me, take some.'

'You never gave any to Mr. Mullintosh, Jack?' exclaimed the sister.

'I did, and you should have seen his face. "What is this infernal filth?" he said spluttering. "Cold coffee," I said. "It's all my sister allows me." "God help you!" said he.'

'You're romancing, my dear boy; you've never told me that before,' exclaimed Ethel, reddening suddenly at the last words. 'I daresay he was disappointed, but I'm certain he said nothing of the kind.'

'Of course he is romancing, Miss Smart,' said Heriot. 'I cannot conceive an individual so high-principled and refined as Mr. Mullintosh making use of so offensive an expression. I feel sure that what he said was more delicately-worded.'

'Indeed it was not,' chuckled Smart, in a way that seemed to Waring excessively irritating. 'What's more, he wanted to administer doses of what was left to the prisoner we had got, till he told us who his companions were, but I wouldn't let him. I told him that, as Deputy-Commissioner, I was bound to set my face against the extortion of confessions by anything of the nature of torture.'

'This is the first time I've heard this elaborate version of the story, Mr. Waring,' pleaded Ethel, turning a somewhat flushed face to the new arrival from Minmyo. 'I hope you won't believe all my brother says.'

She seemed a good deal more put out at her brother's words than Waring would have expected her to be, and he really felt quite sorry for her. 'I certainly will not,' he said. He was forced to admit that, with a heightened colour, his hostess was adorable, and for a moment he found it in his heart,—he knew not rightly why—to envy Heriot the hold he had so clearly gained on Ethel's fancy.

'I never do believe half your brother says. He is one of the most reckless perverters of the truth I've ever met,' added Heriot; and, though he had not been addressed, his gratuitous assurance earned from Miss Smart the guerdon of a sweeter smile than any that had been bestowed upon Waring.

'I always take coffee out in camp with me,' said the latter solemnly, after a short pause, during which the sight of Ethel's still perturbed face impressed him with a vague idea that it was desirable that the conversation should be changed. 'It goes much better with tinned milk than tea, you know.'

'I expect it does,' observed Ethel; and it seemed to Waring in the impressive silence that followed that his remark had been rather inconsequent. However he had created a diversion, and Ethel seemed grateful to him for it, which after all was the most important thing. 'That was the time you got that man from Bo Chet's gang, wasn't it?' he continued.

'Yes,' said Smart. 'That is, we

had every reason to believe that the dacoity was committed by Bo Chet's gang, though our prisoner never let on. Nobody but that lot would have had the impudence to do what the chaps at Thayetbin did.'

- 'What was that?' asked Waring.
  'I haven't heard anything of the details of the case.'
- 'Why, one of the jokers, a man whom the others called Shwe Myaing, seems to have prodded an old woman to death with a spear; more for the fun of hearing her squeal than anything else, so at any rate the headman of the village, whom they had tied up and who saw it all, said.'
- 'Shwe Myaing!' exclaimed Waring; 'I think I know the beggar—a lanky, ugly brute. I had him up for receiving stolen property last year, and gave him three months.'
- 'I know,' continued Smart; 'it ought to have been six. I very nearly

called for the case in revision. Well, he did for her any way, and before they decamped they shifted her body into a squatting position in the corner of the dacoited house, shoved a big cheroot into her mouth, and left her with a cheeky note stuck between her fingers, scrawled in pencil and addressed

'By Jove, what incarnate fiends they can be when they like!' ejaculated Waring.

to me, if you please.'

'Isn't it awful?' cried Ethel. 'One can hardly believe that they are human, when one hears what they do when their blood is up. What did they say in the note, Jack? You've never told me.'

'And I never intend to tell you, my child,' returned Smart. 'Come, shall we go into the drawing-room? It's cooler there.'

So to the drawing-room they repaired—a comical little drawing-room,

full of Japanese fans, China matting, and cane chairs tempered to the limbs of the tired polo-player by means of gay-coloured, silk cushions. Here the punkahs swung with a more generous sweep, and here it was that, at Waring's earnest request, Ethel performed on the piano that had accompanied her from Rangoon, and rendered herself more than ever bewitching to the recluse from Minmyo. It was only a moderately good piano; it had not been tuned for some time, and many gifted amateurs would have refused point-blank to sit down to it; but it was the first of its kind in Tatkin, and to Waring, who had a fair musical ear and could distinguish bad playing from good, it seemed to emit, under his hostess's small white hands, tones that were positively divine. The only instruments of music there had been in Tatkin on the occasion of his last visit were a

banjo and a disreputable kind of hurdy-gurdy styled an Ariston, which, except as an incentive to manslaughter, failed utterly to justify its boldly superlative title; and in the intervals between two of Mendelssohn's Lieder Ohne Worte, Miss Smart was diverted by a description of how Waring had spent the better part of the first day of one of his previous visits to head-quarters in his bedroom, wheedling discordant sounds out of the vitals of the latter instrument till the Station called aloud for mercy.

'You must be fond of music, Mr. Waring,' laughed Ethel, after the story had been retailed by Heriot from his seat in the verandah. 'It takes a lot to make a musical-box go down.'

'I'm very fond of it indeed,' said Waring, 'though I must confess that I know very little about it; and I must tell you that, as regards the musical-box, it was literally the first

note of anything like English music that I had heard for months. I simply sat and drank the tunes in. Your playing now is a treat such as I haven't had for years.'

'Well, I'm going to give you a good dose now,' said the girl. 'Would you like another of the *Lieder*, or shall I play you something of Chopin?'

'Oh, another of the *Lieder*, please; as many more as you like. Do let's have the one with the little twiddle in the high notes—that's it, I think—yes, the *Gondollied*. I don't read music, but I know the look of the pieces I like.'

She played him the Gondollied and another and then another, and Waring would have liked to ask her for yet another, but he could see she was getting tired and restless; and some intuitive faculty, which he seemed to have developed in the last few hours,

told him that, do what she would,—and she strove to keep her attention fixed, it was with difficulty that Ethel could prevent her mind from wandering away from Mendelssohn and him to the verandah, where Heriot's tall, not ungraceful, form lounged in a chair beside the Deputy-Commissioner. She gave something like a sigh of relief when eventually she led the way to the verandah. Waring seated himself beside his superior officer, and presently found himself wondering why it should concern him that an absurdly short space of time had elapsed before Ethel Smart and Heriot were absorbed in earnest conversation at some little distance from him. Smart reclined in a chair at his side, unbuttoned as to his waistcoat, at peace with himself and the world, and took the opportunity of improving the occasion by adding somewhat to the short sketch of the duties of a Treasury-Officer,

which he had himself cut abruptly short in the earlier part of the day; but though Waring professed to listen, and, from time to time, as occasion and the pauses in his host's discourse offered, threw in a comprehensive grunt, his attention was centred on the couple at the farther end of the verandah, who, seated close to each other, were deep in a low-voiced colloquy.

The night was far advanced when the two guests eventually rose to go,—so advanced, in fact, that after the farewells had been spoken, and they were descending the verandah steps, Ethel Smart called out to Heriot: 'You mustn't mind if I'm a little late to-morrow morning. We have been very dissipated to-night, and I may oversleep myself.'

'I can wait,' returned Heriot, and then he added: 'in any case I shall be here by half-past six,'

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They were going out riding together the next morning. So much was clear, and, as Waring stalked homeward behind the sleepy lantern-bearer, he remembered and was able to endorse Mullintosh's words. Without doubt Heriot had 'come out' since he had seen him last.

## CHAPTER V

DESPITE his dissipation at the Smarts', Waring was at the Treasury early on the following morning, and, as a reward for his zeal, was privileged, before he left again for the mess, with a sight of the riders returning from their morning canter. He was deep in dusty, dampstained registers in the accountant's den, interrogating the meek, nervous Eurasian, whose special domain he had invaded, when his attention was attracted by the sound of the Treasury guard turning out, and from his seat he observed Ethel Smart and her cavalier walking their ponies across the short cut that traversed the Court-house compound and led past the Treasury and the Military Police lines to the Deputy-Commissioner's bungalow. Ethel rode a few yards in advance of Heriot, erect and smiling on her Burman pony, clad in a serviceable habit of khaki drill, her little face, fanned to a sunny warmth by the crisp morning air, peeping out from under her neat white sun-helmet. Heriot, who had lighted the inevitable cigarette, brought up the rear in dignified silence on a well-shaped countrybred. The two passed the office door without noticing the industrious worker within, but halted a little farther on. Waring heard Heriot addressing the havildar 1 of the guard and the havildar replying, and a moment later was aware of that functionary saluting before him, with the intimation that Hayet Sahib had sent saalams. Picking up his hat he emerged from the office door, and found the riders seated on their ponies opposite the guard.

<sup>1</sup> A native sergeant.

'Well, you are energetic, Mr. Waring!' cried the girl, as he appeared in the sunshine before them. 'I would not believe Mr. Heriot when he said that it was your pony that was being led up and down outside, and that you were hard at work already.'

'So we had a little bet on the subject,' said Heriot, taking up the tale, 'and we had you fetched out to see who was right. Well,' he added, as Ethel put in an indignant disclaimer, 'we also, I must admit, wanted your opinion in another little matter at which we are, I grieve to say, at variance. Miss Smart thinks her pony is going a little lame, and I think not. Do you consider there's anything the matter with it?'

'He has certainly got rather a funny action,' said Waring, after watching the movements of the pony, a sullen-looking dun, with a round, restless eye, 'but I doubt very much whether he is lame.

Where did you get the beast from, Miss Smart? I seem to know the look of him. He's not your own, is he?'

- 'No, he's not mine; Captain Pym lent him to me. He's one of the Military Police ponies that the troopers ride when they play polo.'
- 'Ah, now I know the beggar,' said Waring. 'I was pretty sure I'd seen him before. He's all right,—nothing the matter with him; it's only his action; I've noticed it before. But surely, Miss Smart, Captain Pym doesn't know you are riding this beast?'
- 'He said I might have one, and this is the one the *subadar* 1 sent round. Why shouldn't he know?'
- 'Well, so far as I recollect, this chap has a very bad name for bolting. When I was down here last he very nearly did for a military policeman. Yes, I'm pretty sure it was this one;

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A native captain.

I should recognise those hind legs anywhere.'

'Why, he's been going beautifully, Mr. Waring,' exclaimed the girl; 'he's been as quiet as a lamb, and as willing as can be. His paces are not all that can be desired, it is true, but I'm used to Burmans by this time, and it's only very seldom that one notices that curious kind of limp he has. In fact, I don't see how I can do better till I get a pony of my own, as I hope to do very shortly.'

'There's no accounting for tempers; you may have got him on one of his good days,' said Waring dubiously, dropping back into the shade of the Court-house. 'Don't you know the beast, Heriot?'

'No,' replied Heriot, watching a ring of smoke curl up against the red shingles of the Treasury roof. 'I don't think it matters much,' he added after a few reflective puffs, while Waring

still looked askance at Ethel's mount and the girl bent to stroke the pony's bristly neck. 'It'll only be for a day or two more at most, and after all he's got lots of room to stretch his legs in if he wants to,' and he swept his chin round towards the wide expanse of open ground that lay behind and on two sides of the Station. 'You're sure you're not mistaken about the brute?'

'Certain,' asserted Waring.

Heriot gathered up his reins. 'I'll lend you a pony to-morrow, Miss Smart,' he said.

'I am not sure that I shall ride tomorrow,' said Ethel. 'In fact, now that I come to think of it, I'm sure I can't.'

'Well, shall we say the day after? You must give me the pleasure of another ride,' continued Heriot.

'Very well, but I'm not going to ride your pony. I'm going to ride this one,

'You had much better not, Miss Smart,' put in Waring, but Miss Smart did not hear him. She was gazing full at Heriot. 'I'm going to ride this one,' she replied, 'to show you you were wrong when you said I was nervous.'

'Nervous! I accuse you of nervousness? Heaven forbid!'

'Yes, you did though. You said I was afraid to give him his head, so I'm going to ride him the day after tomorrow on a plain snaffle and let him have lots of rein.'

Heriot gazed back at her, the dawn of a smile trembling under his moustache. 'Very well, please yourself, Miss Smart,' he made reply. 'Let us hope you will have an opportunity of distinguishing yourself.'

'Let us hope not,' said Waring. The words were uttered under his breath, but it would have made no difference if they had been spoken aloud. Ethel had no ears for any one

but Heriot, who with a 'Well, Miss Smart, I suppose you are going to indulge in the luxury of a breakfast,' roused his pony with a jog of his spur and led the way towards the Deputy-Commissioner's bungalow.

Waring watched the couple move on in silence. 'I'll speak to Pym; he will know whether the brute is safe or not,' he ejaculated mentally, as he returned slowly to his registers. He was presently to all appearance immersed in accounts, but, if the truth be told, it was some time before the vision of a well-favoured young woman, sitting blithe and radiant in the morning sunlight, ceased to hover before his mind's eye, to the no slight detriment of his official duties. And in the train of this vision came many thoughts. It seemed clear to him that, putting it on its lowest footing, Heriot was not indifferent to Ethel Smart, in view of which the placid disregard of her safety

he had just exhibited appeared positively incomprehensible. It was not for him, he reflected, an uninterested spectator, to look with too critical an eye on his friend's conduct towards a girl who doubtless admired him and was ready to put up with a good deal at his hands. It was not his place to condemn. Yet, while he made this admission, he could not deny himself the pleasure of imagining how much more solicitous his care would have been had he, and not Heriot, been the favoured mortal to whose escort Ethel had entrusted herself; and through all he felt that he would have given a very considerable sum to have a definite reply to a certain question he found himself putting with irksome iteration to an imaginary interlocutor. He was no more able that morning than he had been the day before to explain why Miss Smart should be the object of livelier interest to him than any

other lady of his acquaintance; and he had not dreamed of speculating what he should think, say, or do, supposing he were to learn that the Forest-Officer did not, and never would, care a rap for the Deputy-Commissioner's sister. Still, for all that, the plaguey oftrecurring question, 'Is he really as fond of her as she is of him?' tingled as persistently in his ears as though all his future course of action had to take its shape from the answer given.

The echo of the same question was still ringing through his brain as he sat, on the afternoon of the same day, under Mrs. Jones's wheezy punkah, awaiting in stolid patience the arrival of that lady in her drawing-room. He had been making a round, or more properly the round of calls, for a visit to one of the ladies of the Station meant, for the newcomer who had any regard for his peace of mind, a visit to

all. Mrs. Sparrow and Miss Smart had not been at home, and, in his state of vague restlessness, he was only too glad to find that Mrs. Jones was ready and willing, when appropriately attired, to receive him. His gratitude, in fact, was such that he almost forgave her the dreary quarter of an hour he was kept waiting in the little drawingroom, with nothing to do but to examine the portraits of Mrs. Jones's black-haired relatives and to listen to the rustle of raiment in the all too adjacent bedroom, where the dark little lady was adorning herself for the critical eye of her visitor. When she did at last emerge, wafted out on the wings of a marvellous semi-oriental mixture of perfumes, and stirring the moribund punkah with her shrill voice to renewed animation, she did not require much leading to drift into a discussion of the matter that lay nearest to Waring's heart, and to enlarge on it

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over her tea-tray till her hearer felt that the inquisitiveness that had led him to broach this particular subject had been nothing short of indecent.

'Dear me, yes; he is really very attentive to her, —and she—oh, any one can see it—she is positively devoted to him. A nice girl? Oh yes, very, quite charming, a particularly nice girl. You take sugar, don't you? I'm so sorry we have no lump-sugar. It's a great nuisance the boat being so late this week; we are expecting such a great lot of stores from Rangoon, but now they haven't come. Yes, she is really charming. Perhaps just a little tiny bit too fond of letting everybody know she is the Deputy-Commissioner's sister; but after all, she is so young that it is only natural, and I daresay she will get over it in time. You haven't noticed it, Mr. Waring? Well, I daresay not; you have not been long enough in the place to notice it, I

expect. No, I will not say anything against her; she is nice and sweet, and we are the very best of friends. She has been to tea several times, and we have got on very well; but now she sees so much of Mr. Heriot that she has no time to give to old friends. What do you say? Engaged? Oh dear no, I do not think so, not yet; perhaps soon they will be, but I think it is too early Besides, sometimes they do not see each other for several days; I know that, for-look, from my back verandah I can see nearly all that happens in the Smarts' bungalow, and-do you know? -up to yesterday Mr. Heriot had not been to the house for, -oh, for ever so long. Do eat some of these biscuits; I think you will like them. No, I am sure that they are not engaged, and of course it will depend upon Mr. Heriot whether they ever are. Yes, you are right, Mr. Waring, he will be very lucky to get her, for she is a nice girl

and has always been a great friend of mine.'

- 'So you really think she is fond of him?' said Waring.
- 'Oh, very,—I think she is devoted to him.'

'And you think he is devoted to her?' he continued, inwardly disgusted with himself for being cursed with a restless curiosity that drove him to stoop to such crude interrogatories; for after all, as he asked himself again and again, why, in Heaven's name, should it matter to him whether Heriot did or did not have any affection for Ethel Smart?

Mrs. Jones indulged in a dubious shrug, and rolled her black eyes expressively. 'I really don't think he knows whether he really cares for her or not,' she said. 'Sometimes he seems to like her very much, and then again at other times he seems to think nothing of her, and is as rude to her

as he can be. Still, I think he is generally glad enough to be in her company, don't you?'

'He certainly seems so.'

'Yes, and so long as he is with her I really believe that he does not think it worth the trouble to consider whether he cares for her enough to marry her. Oh, you men are all the same!'

Mrs. Jones's view was certainly the one that would have appealed as correct to the ordinary observer of Heriot's conduct. Waring's knowledge of the Forest-Officer's temperament was, however, more extensive than his hostess's. 'I am not so sure of that,' he said. 'I have an idea that Mr. Heriot knows his own mind well enough.'

'And you would very much like to know what that mind is, I have no doubt,' exclaimed Mrs. Jones roguishly. 'Ah well, Mr. Waring, you mustn't break your heart if he does make up his mind and finds he does care for her.'

And this delicate sally made Waring realise that for his ill-advised inquisitiveness he deserved even more than he had received at Mrs. Jones's hands.

It was not till late that evening that he heard that Pym, the Battalion-Commandant, had gone out in camp, not to return for several days, and that till then he could get no information about Ethel's pony except from the Military Police subadar. That same evening he learned that Miss Smart would be delighted if he would accompany her and Heriot on the ride they intended taking on the next morning but one. Why his presence was wanted, it was not given to him to understand, but, though at first he hesitated, he eventually accepted the invitation. Whether he were de trop or not, he could, he reflected, at any rate help to look after Ethel.

## CHAPTER VI

'Wait till I get my lease renewed,' exclaimed Ma Tin Gyi, glaring after Mrs. Jones's white sun-hat, as it bobbed away briskly, amid a medley of bright head-coverings, down the central aisle of the bazaar. 'Wait till I get my lease renewed, then, if ever I sell her so much as an onion below the market-rate, may I die a violent death!'

Mrs. Jones had just finished her daily visitation, and the bazaar was beginning to breathe more freely, to feel for its cheroot, and to look about it a little.

The secret that enabled Mrs. Jones, despite the meagreness of Mr. Jones's pay, to preserve a financial equilibrium,

and at times even to emerge at the end of a month with a few rupees on the credit side of her domestic account, was twofold. In the first place, this excellent lady, like the good housewife that she was, made a point of rising every day at six and of personally visiting the bazaar, thereby acquiring an exhaustive knowledge of the actual market-price as opposed to the fancy-price that would have been charged her had she been content to leave her catering to a servant. In the second place, she had discovered that there existed a rate, just a trifle lower than the market-rate, at which, as spouse of the police-officer in special charge of the bazaar, she could, by dint of judicious haggling, purchase what she wanted from the more submissive of the stall-holders. result of this combination of energy and shrewdness, she could (as she did) boast with truth that her daily expenses

cost her on the average very little more than the difference between the amount Miss Smart paid for hers and the amount she would have had to pay had she been learned in market-rates and done her shopping herself. She had been fully justifying that vaunt on the morning following the day of Waring's visit to her, and Ma Tin Gyi, the occupier of the extremely popular fruit and vegetable stall at the corner by the entrance, had been learning this, not by any means for the first time, to her cost. She was an elderly lady, this Ma Tin Gyi, whose ample body, clad in a loose, dirty white jacket and a flaring petticoat of pink, crossed tartan-wise with black, looked absurdly large below the face which surmounted it — a flat, brown, shiny face on which small-pox had left its baleful impress-a face all mouth, nostrils, and forehead, with the sparse hair drawn tightly back from it and

twisted aloft into a dumpy grizzled knot. She sat there, surrounded by her pumpkins and pummeloes, that morning and gazed with no very loving look after Mrs. Jones's retreating figure. She was really rather put out; but, with all the buoyancy of her race, she refused to brood for any length of time over her wrongs, and, as her eye caught that of a middle-aged Burman who had approached her stall, she incontinently displayed two rows of red betel-stained teeth and relieved her mind with a strident guffaw.

The newcomer lowered the two oiltins he was carrying, slung at each end of a bamboo yoke, and, with an answering grin, being a man of few words, squatted silently down near the stall. He tucked in a stray end of the well-worn yellow silk head-kerchief which hung down limply over one ear, and drawing from the folds of his waist-cloth the stump of a white

cheroot, held out his hand for the cigar that Ma Tin Gyi had laid aside on the floor of the stall, the better to do battle with the Inspector's lady, and had now picked up again. It was almost out, and he had to blow on the ash for some little time before he could get a glow sufficient to light his own cheroot; but the business of kindling was finished at length, and the two, facing each other, puffed for a while in silence.

The woman was the first to speak. 'She only gave me an anna for plantains, Ko Tu,' she said, with a turn of her head in the direction in which Mrs. Jones had disappeared.

'For how many bunches?' asked Ko Tu, municipal water-carrier.

'Three.'

Ko Tu clicked his tongue despondently. 'Amalè!' he ejaculated, and sucked more vigorously at his cheroot.

'How can I live,' exclaimed Ma

Tin Gyi testily, 'if I only get one anna for three bunches of plantains? Three bunches, and *nanthabus*, too!'

Ko Tu made no attempt to reply to a question which was manifestly unanswerable. 'When does the lease of your stall expire?' he asked, going, like a wise man, to the root of the matter without delay.

'In Tabodwe; she knows it, and that's why she comes to me. Formerly she always bought her vegetables from Ma Kin,—everything save brinjals; no one in the market has brinjals like mine; but Ma Kin has just had a renewal of her lease for a year, and will not sell to her below the marketrate, so now she gets everything from me.'

Ko Tu grunted sympathetically and watched while Ma Tin Gyi rummaged among her wares. After a little

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A vegetable somewhat similar to that known in the West Indies as the egg-plant.

search she pulled out two plantains, which she solemnly handed to him, and he as solemnly received and began eating.

Two tall Sikhs of the Military Police lounged up to the stall, in scarlet puggree and white undress, large-boned, handsome men, with wellshaped faces and gleaming teeth. One of them wished to purchase a pumpkin, and for the next few minutes Ma Tin Gyi's energies were taken from her cheroot and devoted to haggling with the warrior, as he stood, weighing his purchase carefully in his hand, under a running fire of chaff from a brace of festive lancecorporals of the Battalion's Goorkha company, who were investing in earthenware pots at an adjacent stall. The bargain was struck with the usual amount of good-humoured banter on each side, and the Sikhs sauntered complacently onward, having got their pumpkin, be it said, at a price a fraction higher than that at which Mrs. Jones would have obtained it.

'Ah, these kalas,' said Ma Tin Gyi, with a compassionate shrug as she tossed the coppers into her lacquerwork betel-box and resumed her cheroot, 'they are all the same; they hate parting with their pice.' There was no rancour in her voice. Military Police were her best customers, and she was not afraid of them, for their domain lay outside the Magistrate's courts, and they could tell no nasty tales when the question of the renewal of bazaar-leases came up before the Municipal Committee; yet she could not refrain from an allusion to that one of their weaknesses of which she had daily experience.

'They are better than the Civil Police, though,' said Ko Tu, with his

<sup>1</sup> Foreigners; anybody except a Siamese or a Chinaman is a kala to a Burman.

mouth full of plantain, and his memory of the last occasion on which the Town Sergeant had got him fined for a breach of the Opium Act.

- 'The Civil Police—I should think so! The Civil Police are worse than Bo Chet,' exclaimed Ma Tin Gyi, who also had painful recollections of her own. She broke off short, for one of that force in *khaki* jacket and striped red waistcloth had approached the stall—a round-faced young man with a thick neck and a few straggling black hairs on his upper lip. He was on duty in the bazaar that morning—a person to be looked to and conciliated.
- 'What are you eating?' he enquired cheerfully of Ko Tu, after a prodigious yawn and a rapid glance round the bazaar to make sure that there was no superior officer near.
- 'Plantains,' replied the laconic water-carrier, who had begun peeling his second.

The policeman hitched up his striped red cloth reflectively and squatted alongside of Ko Tu. The latter broke his second plantain in half and, without a word, handed one half to the guardian of the peace. Both munched in silence, stopping at intervals to show their teeth with a guttural laugh at some fresh witticism of the Goorkhas, who had passed on to Ma Tin Gyi's stall and were poking fun at the portly lady, while they selected their purchases.

'Where is Bo Chet now, Shwe Zin?' enquired Ma Tin Gyi of the constable when the Goorkhas had passed on chuckling, and she was free for another puff and a word or two of gossip.

'I do not know,' said the policeman rather sullenly. 'They say he is fed by Ko Waik of Thonzè.'

'Why, there's a police-station on Thonzè,' exclaimed Ma Tin Gyi.

'Why doesn't the Thonzè sergeant catch him and earn the Government reward?'

'The Thonzè sergeant is afraid,' sneered Shwe Zin. 'Is not Bo Chet's wife niece to Ko Waik? No one can do what displeases Ko Waik at Thonzè.'

'His niece has been deported to Sagaing, all the same,' laughed Ma Tin Gyi. The policeman made no reply.

'I hear Maun Shaung is very ill,' put in Ko Tu, who had risen, and was slowly adjusting his water-tins.

'He is,' said Shwe Zin.

'If he dies,' said Ma Tin Gyi, 'who will be Myothugyi of Thonzè? What do you think, Shwe Zin?'

Shwe Zin dug thoughtfully in the earth with the tip of his sword and laughed. 'Ko Waik is very powerful,' he said. He was not going to commit himself.

'I have heard that Maung Myo wishes to be Myothugyi,' said the woman. 'If Maung Shaung dies, will he not tell the Government about Ko Waik and Bo Chet, and prevent his being appointed?'

'He cannot,' said Shwe Zin. 'He is not strong enough to hurt Ko Waik; Ko Waik has too much authority. Maung Myo has tried to injure him, but what is the good?'

'Yes, what is the good? You may throw a jujube-seed at Mount Myinmo, but it won't budge for that,' said Ko Tu, shouldering his tins. 'But you are a Thonzè man, Shwe Zin; why don't you try and get the reward?'

Shwe Zin gazed sheepishly at the point of his sword. 'I am afraid,' he said naïvely, and Ko Tu ambled off laughing.

'What would you do with the reward if you got it, Shwe Zin?' enquired Ma Tin Gyi, arranging the

papayas 1 on her stall to the best advantage.

- 'I should give a pwè,' 2 said Shwe Zin, 'a pwè at Thonzè. I should get actors from Mandalay, as the Myook did when the Chief Commissioner came last Tawthalin. I am going back to Thonzè soon,' he added.
  - 'When?' asked Ma Tin Gyi.
- 'On the tenth waxing. My time at headquarters will be up and I shall return, and perhaps,—who knows?—perhaps I shall catch Bo Chet. It will be a lovely pwè.'

The stream of life flowing past the stall was bright and unceasing. The burly, black-moustached Burman in a gorgeous pink silk pahso,<sup>3</sup> at whose approach Shwe Zin rose demurely to his feet, was the Myook, or Native

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> A kind of fruit.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Any show or entertainment, but usually of a theatrical kind.

<sup>3</sup> A long scarf worn round the waist with something of the effect of a kilt.

Magistrate, on his way to a Municipal meeting. Not far behind the local magnate came one of the most influential of the Municipal Commissioners, Ah Shein, the proprietor of the one licensed liquor-shop in the town, a little shrivelled, bright-eyed Chinaman in a large-brimmed pith sun-hat and voluminous dark-blue trousers. Yonder was a group of Shans from the Northern hills, gaping wide-eyed amid the bustle of the bazaar, and with them a Kachin or two fresh from the far-off jademines. There swaggered a Mussulman havildar of Military Police, resplendent in a green velvet waistcoat laced with gold, hobnobbing with the serang, or boatswain, of the Government steamer, which was visible, through the bazaardoor, smoking under the high riverbank. A thin-lipped, sharp-featured Chittagonian was the latter, with a white, conical, open-work linen cap on his closely-shaved head, and his neck swathed in a gaudy woollen comforter, for the morning air was crisp. A crowd of lascars from one of the riversteamers followed on the footsteps of the serang, and before they had fully passed Shwe Zin shot into the air again and saluted guiltily, for round the corner swung Mullintosh, the District Superintendent of Police, with a couple of Inspectors striding behind him, and brought up at Ma Tin Gyi's stall.

'Well, Ma Gyi,' he exclaimed, gazing big and rubicund at the old lady. 'When will those cheroots be ready? Have you told that woman to hurry up with them?'

Ma Tin Gyi's hands went together, and she leered over the tips of her fingers at the District Superintendent. She was one of the few native women in Tatkin who was not in her heart frightened of the Europeans. 'They will be ready to-morrow, *Thakin*,' she

answered. 'They would have been ready by this time, only Ma Chin has not been able to help. She is the best cigar-roller in the village.'

- 'Who is Ma Chin? Why can't she help? Has she got fever?'
  - 'She has gone to Sagaing, Thakin.'
  - 'The devil she has! What for?'
- 'In accordance with the orders of Government,' said Ma Tin Gyi, delivering herself of the Government with great unction. 'She went with the other relations of Bo Chet.'
- 'What a nuisance!' exclaimed Mullintosh disgustedly. 'Why didn't you tell me that before, Ma Gyi? I should never have sent up her name for deportation to Sagaing if I had known. How is she related to Bo Chet?'

He addressed the senior Inspector, who referred to his junior, who in his turn asked the question of Shwe Zin, who replied that the lady alluded to was daughter of Bo Chet's elder sister, and was promptly called a jungle-dog by his superior officer for standing on one leg while replying. It was a sad fact that Shwe Zin had not profited as much as he should have by his course of training at headquarters.

'Make a note of her name, Po Thet,' said Mullintosh to the senior Inspector. 'We must remember to get her back as soon as we can. There will be no difficulty. We are not going to lose the best cigar-roller in Tatkin if I can help it. Mind, Ma Gyi, I must have those cheroots tomorrow.' And he swept off to the police-station as rapidly as he had come, with the Inspector ever bustling behind him.

'I never knew Ma Chin was a good cigar-roller,' observed Shwe Zin, when Mullintosh and his myrmidons had disappeared, and he could re-seat himself with impunity and nibble at another of Ma Tin Gyi's plantains.

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'No more she is,' returned the vendor of garden-produce, with a suspicion of contempt in her voice for the policeman's obtuseness. 'She is a very poor workwoman, but I want her back in Tatkin. She owes me four annas for tomatoes, and she was deported before she could pay. I shall make her give me eight annas, when she comes back, for this.'

## CHAPTER VII

THE fact that, while two is company, three is none, can nowhere be more pitilessly demonstrated than on horseback, when one of the three concerned is a lady and always able, by virtue of her side-saddle, to turn her back on one of her two attendant cavaliers without offence. Such was the galling discovery that Waring made during the ride that he took in company with Ethel and Heriot three days after his arrival in Tatkin. As he jogged along on his wiry Burman pony (an ex-racer with a remarkable turn of speed), he had ample leisure to wonder why, in the name of fortune, he had been asked, and with such a show of graciousness, to join the

couple who rode together, now in front of, now behind, and now beside him, as the exigencies of the path permitted, but at all times, it seemed, equally oblivious of his presence except on the rare occasions when Ethel, realising with a sudden pang of conscience that she and Heriot were not alone, addressed a fugitive remark to him which only served to render his isolation all the more pronounced. Had he been more versed in the ways and wiles of womankind he would, without hesitation, have characterised Miss Smart's action as an attempt, and an unsuccessful one, to play him off against Heriot; and, in so doing, he would have fallen into grievous error, for, as is frequently the case with large-hearted young women, it was a multiplicity of motives, many of them far more disinterested than her female friends would have given her credit for, which had urged the Deputy-Commissioner's sister to invite the recluse of Minmyo to form the superfluous third at her riding-party. As it was, however, Waring, to whom the workings of the feminine mind were a sealed book, made no attempt to assign reasons for what Miss Smart had been pleased to do; he only marvelled that he should be where he was, and resolved that, as he was there, he would not be deterred from carrying out the main object of his ride, which was to see that no harm came to Ethel on her pony.

It was not till the ride was drawing to a close, and the roofs of Tatkin had risen once more into sight, that Waring began to feel himself drawn into the current of talk that had been rippling around him. Ethel and Heriot had for some little time been engaged in an animated discussion as to the possibility of starting golf in the Station, and the chances the game (which had just been introduced into Upper Burmah) had of being patronised; and their taciturn

companion was now appealed to, first for his views on these weighty questions, and afterwards for his decision as to which of the many favourable sites in the vicinity would be best suited for the links.

'I should think one could get some very decent links about where we are now,' he observed in answer to the latter question. They had halted for a moment to consider the lie of the land, and Waring's opinion was hazarded with some diffidence, for his conception of the requirements of the royal and ancient game was, like that of the majority of Upper Burmans at that time, decidedly hazy.

'Too far from the Station' was Heriot's pronouncement. 'No one would take the trouble to come out here for a game.'

'You mean you wouldn't, I suppose, Mr. Heriot,' laughed Ethel, shaking a sunny head at the Forest-Officer. 'I'm sure any person who was really keen on the game would be only too glad to come and play here. It's not really so very far, is it, Mr. Waring?'

'No, not very; but there are heaps of places where one could start ladies' links on the jail-side very much nearer than this, if that would do,' said Waring, who had seen the ladies' links at Rangoon and felt that here at any rate he was on tolerably safe ground. 'But I don't think,' he added, 'that there are any bunkers there, though of course——' and at that point he stopped, for it suddenly came over him that perhaps ladies' links did not require what he vaguely conceived to be an essential of the game.

'Oh, never mind the bunkers; we'll do without bunkers,' exclaimed Ethel cheerfully. 'It will make it so much easier.'

'Or look upon the jail as one,' said Heriot. 'Very well, let's make a beginning with ladies' links close to the Station, so that no stumbling-block may be put in the way of the weaker brethren,—those who are not so keen as Miss Smart—in which category, by the way, you would appear to include me, Miss Smart.'

- 'That I certainly do,' replied the girl.
- 'What makes you think I'm not keen on golf?'
- 'I can't imagine you keen on anything in this wide world; can you, Mr. Waring?'
- 'I've seen him keen enough on polo at times,' said Waring the cautious.
- 'He certainly plays hard enough when once he's started,' admitted Ethel; 'but I wouldn't call him an enthusiastic player, Mr. Waring, would you?'
- 'How do you know how I play?' interposed Heriot. 'You're never on the ground till near the end of the last chucker.'

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- 'Oh, Mr. Heriot, how can you? I've been round often and often just after you have begun. It was only the day before yesterday that I was late. I know the play of all of you by this time.'
- 'Do you really! then how do you think Waring plays? They say he funks terribly.'
- 'Mr. Waring plays very nicely,' answered Ethel, with a smile at the individual referred to; 'better than you, I should think. But, do you know, I don't think either of you play so well as Captain Pym.'
- 'Oh, Pym's an exceptional player,' exclaimed Waring. 'You won't find a man that can come near Pym in Upper Burmah.'
- 'To us poor mortals Captain Pym's play is a revelation,' said Heriot. 'But to return to golf; you haven't told me yet why you think I'm not keen on golf.'

'I've told you I don't think you can be keen on anything,' replied Ethel. 'You seem to have no enthusiasm, no zeal of any kind,—unless it is for smoking cigarettes.'

'You are giving me a shocking character, Miss Smart,' returned Heriot, who had drawn out his silver case and was feeling for his match-box. 'You are quite wrong, all the same, though. I'm not demonstrative, like that shallow chap Waring there, but I have my feelings. I can live in the future as well as in the present. I assure you I am looking forward with the keenest delight to solacing my declining years with golf. I can imagine myself, a dear old gentleman of seventy or thereabouts, being wheeled down to the links in my bath-chair and doddering round with some octogenarian crony whom I fondly think I can give points to. But I will not—no, I will not consent to be dragged out three miles from the Station in the heat of a tropical afternoon when I can get my game nearer home.'

'Three miles! You surely don't call this three miles from the Station? Why, I don't think it's more than one,' cried Ethel. 'I do believe I could canter home in five minutes from here; in fact, I'm sure I could. Come along, Mr. Waring, we'll try. You can follow when you've finished lighting your cigarette, Mr. Heriot.'

She turned her pony's head home-wards and darted off; Waring swung round after her, and Heriot was left by the roadside in a gathering cloud of blue tobacco-smoke. He was lighting his cigarette very leisurely; he, at any rate, was not going to exert himself unnecessarily.

It was a matter of a few seconds for Waring's swift little pony to catch up Ethel's mount, which was pounding along with neck extended and ears

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well back, and for a moment his bay forged ahead. A cry from Ethel, 'Oh, please don't go so fast,' caused him to tighten his rein, and he had already changed his pace from a canter to a trot when his companion's pony clattered past him at a hand-gallop, and, before he had fully realised the situation, steed and rider were some twenty or thirty yards in front of him. Through the dust he could see that Ethel was in difficulties; she was sitting back, sawing with both hands at her pony's mouth, but the defiant wagging of the dun's neck showed that it had no intention of knuckling under to a plain snaffle. The beast was completely out of the girl's control, and Waring could see that it was bolting straight for the station and its stable. He caught a flashing glimpse of a white face turned back to him as he dug the spurs into his pony's side, and even while he rose to its first startled forward leap, there

crossed his mind, like an uncomfortable dream, the recollection of an accident that had happened to a native policeman, a few months back, under circumstances like the present. The excitement of the chase stirred his blood, but through all the angry throbbing of his brain he could only think how vividly the pale face that he had for a brief second seen conjured up the memory of another face,—the face at the end of the long limp body he had once helped to lift up from where it had fallen below the low stable-eaves, the skull fractured against the woodwork, a sickening, unrecognisable mass.

He was almost level with her by the time they had reached the knot of native huts outside the Civil Lines, where the inhabitants scuttled nimbly to left and right; but the sound of his pony's hoofs behind stirred the dun to redoubled effort, and for a hundred yards or so it nearly succeeded in shaking its pursuer off. In the end, however, blood and training told; the bay drew up hand over hand, and as they flew past the Court-house, one of the outermost buildings of the Station, Waring leaned forward and outward in his saddle and had the satisfaction of feeling the fingers of his right hand clutch and tighten round the dun's bridle. They were close to the Military Police Lines by this time, and a second later they were racing along between the bamboo palisades of the Station compounds. Already the long row of low-roofed stables loomed ahead of them. For the twinkling of an eye Waring raised his head to see the course they were taking. It was all he dared allow himself, the next moment he was straining at the dun's head and with his left hand trying to pull his own pony in, but on neither of the steeds, now galloping neck to neck, was any effect produced. The bay was by this time as excited as Ethel's pony, and with one hand Waring was quite unable to hold it back. They were only fifty yards off the stables now, and a few more strides would sweep them under a labyrinth of treacherous overhanging eaves. There was no time to warn Ethel of the risk she ran. Only one course was left open to Waring. Letting go with his left hand of his own reins, he made one clutch with it at the dun's mane and slid off his own pony. In a moment he was swept off his feet by the onward rush of Ethel's mount, but he clung desperately on. The pony almost fell, recovered itself, plunged forward, stopped with a jerk, and Waring found himself standing at its head, hatless, with torn riding-breeches, and dredged from head to foot with a thick layer of dust, while half a dozen tall Sikh policemen clustered round, zealous in their offers to help to hold the pony and assist Ethel to dismount.

She sprang to the ground and faced him, a little pale, it is true, but with a smile that showed she had not realised a tithe of the risk she had run. 'Good gracious, Mr. Waring, you are in a state!' she exclaimed. 'I am so very sorry. I do hope you are not hurt,—your poor clothes!'

'Oh, I'm not hurt, thanks,' he replied. His first act, after being assured of Ethel's safety, was to signal to two of the policemen to lead the panting ponies to the stables, his next to pull out his handkerchief and to begin dusting himself aimlessly. 'No more are you, I hope,' he added, looking up between the flicks at her. 'It was a nasty jar and must have shaken you up a good deal. You'd better let one of these men bring you out a chair to sit down upon.'

'No, thanks; I'm not in the least shaken, only a little frightened. It's not nice being bolted with like that. What a horrid brute! You were quite right, Mr. Waring; Captain Pym had no business to lend me such a bolter. But whatever made you jump off your pony? I'm sure mine would have stopped almost directly.'

'Perhaps; I wanted to make quite sure, though,' said Waring, gruffly working with his handkerchief at his left shoulder-blade. Though still rather dazed, he had his wits sufficiently about him to see the necessity of keeping from her how great her danger had been; and he felt devoutly thankful that her knowledge of the languages of India was slight when he perceived that one of the policemen who remained loitering about after the ponies had been led away, had taken upon himself to recall to memory the almost parallel case of the lamented Bugwan Singh, and to point out to his companions, with much circumstance, the spot where that luckless Asiatic's cranium had left its impress on the stable-eaves a few yards from where the runaway had been brought to a standstill.

'You'd better come along to the house, Miss Smart,' he said, catching Ethel's eye fixed with interest on the speaker as he stood and gesticulated under the low roof. 'You really must be a bit shaken. I'm afraid you will feel the reaction directly.'

'I don't think I'm nearly as much shaken as you are,' she made reply. 'At any rate,' she added, with a nervous little laugh, 'I'm not in such a terrible mess. I really must dust you a little more. There, that's very much better,' she continued after a deft application of her *chowry* 1 to the back of his jacket. 'Are they fetching your hat, by the way? Ah yes, I see, here it comes. It's very bad for you to be standing bareheaded in the sun; put

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Chowry, a fly-flapper, usually made of the tail of the Thibetan yak.

my handkerchief over your head till the man gets here with your hat. Here comes Mr. Heriot at last.'

The Forest-Officer approached with his usual unruffled composure. He must have seen from a distance the fast-gathering crowd collected round his two dismounted companions, but there was nothing to show that he had stirred his pony out of the deliberate trot which experience had taught him was not incompatible with the thorough enjoyment of a cigarette. He gazed at Waring without emotion. 'Had a spill, old man?' he enquired. 'What has Waring been doing, Miss Smart—trying acrobatic feats on his pony?'

'Oh, it's nothing,' said Waring curtly; and Ethel added, 'Poor man, he's made himself in a horrid mess jumping off his pony to stop mine! It bolted, you know.'

'Ah,' said Heriot, gazing round him

through his scrupulously adjusted eyeglass, 'very near the stables,—looks as if you had both been trying to emulate the example of Bugwan Singh of pious memory.'

'Tell me, who is Bugwan Singh?' cried Ethel. 'Every one seems to be speaking of Bugwan Singh. That tall man over there in a red *puggree* has been doing nothing the last few minutes but talk about a Bugwan Singh.'

'Bugwan Singh was a Military Policeman,' said Heriot, ignoring Waring's warning glance, 'and once upon a time poor Bugwan Singh's pony bolted with him; it's a way Burman ponies have sometimes, as you know, Miss Smart. This one took him under the eaves just there,—do you see?—where your friend in the red puggree is standing. Nasty things to ride under, are these low overhanging eaves. It was a sad case,—skull smashed to smithereens,—that's the worst of being

six-foot-four. Ask Waring; he knows all about it. Helped to gather up the fragments that remained, didn't you, Waring? Is anything the matter with you, Miss Smart?'

'I'm more shaken than I thought I was,' murmured Ethel. She had turned a more ghastly white and clutched at Waring's sleeve for a moment. 'Let us get home as quickly as possible,' she said. 'Thanks. You were quite right again, Mr. Waring; I'm beginning to feel the reaction.'

## CHAPTER VIII

IT was not till the excitement of the chase had to some extent worn off that Waring made the discovery that he had strained the thumb of his right hand rather severely. He first became aware of the injury in the Smarts' verandah, into which cool retreat the Deputy-Commissioner insisted on conducting him, on his arrival with Ethel, in order that he might take something to steady his nerves and fortify his system before returning to his quarters at the mess. Ethel had there, much to Waring's dismay, waxed eloquent over what she was pleased to look upon as her rescue; and her brother was clearly impressed with the imminence of the risk which his sister had run, and did his best, in his own rough, off-hand manner, to convey to Waring a sense of his obliga-He had sundry brief suggestions make for the treatment of the wounded thumb, and urged Waring repeatedly to have the strain attended to by the Civil Surgeon without delay; he even went to the length of applying, clumsily enough, some special embrocation of his own. But nothing that Smart could do afforded Waring such relief as did the pressure of his sister's palms on the aching joint. She finished rubbing-in the embrocation, and bound the thumb up, using her own handkerchief as a temporary bandage; and the while she made all fast and firm her patient was at a loss whether to marvel most at the ungainliness of his own fist, as it lay partially disabled between her hands, or at the whiteness and dexterity of the girl's fingers as they secured the spotless cambric round that brown and

awkward member. Smart's last injunction, shouted after him from the head of the steps, was to be careful to lie up for the day, and not on any account to use his hand working. Thus it was that the first of the glorious, sleepy mid-day hours separate eleven o'clock breakfast from afternoon tea found the obedient Treasury-Officer, not sitting thankless at the receipt of custom, but extended -in strict compliance with the last of the Deputy - Commissioner's orders --in a long arm-chair, in the shaded depths of the mess verandah, with nothing to do but to smoke, to gaze at his injured hand, and to congratulate himself on not having followed Smart's suggestions in their entirety. His thumb had not yet been inspected by the Civil Surgeon, and he was in consequence still privileged to wear the handkerchief that Ethel's fair hands had bound round it. It was a busi-

ness-like handkerchief, not an ineffectual square of lace, and it was folded about his hand in an exceedingly business-like way-quite, as Miss Smart had been careful to explain, in accordance with the best traditions of the St. John's Ambulance Association. Waring followed its course with his eye again and again round his thumb and wrist down to the point where there was a perhaps rather unprofessional knot, and an end sticking bravely out, on which the letters E.S. stood worked in white silk. The end had been spread wide to show the monogram at its plainest, so that, as Ethel had jocosely observed, while wrestling with that final knot, he might remember to whom he had to return the handkerchief.

As if he were likely to forget! As if he could, for a moment, keep her out of his thoughts! As he lay there in the drowsy noonday stillness, with no sound to break in upon his meditations

but the twittering of the sparrows amid the rafters overhead and the muffled chatter of the native servants in their quarters behind the mess, his memory was free to rove at will over all the incidents of the last four days, from the hour of his first meeting with Ethel, down to the inspired moment when, sitting with his hand in hers, dimly conscious of the grateful pressure of her fingers, he realised, with a half fearful rapture, that the final episode of the morning's ride had, as it were, broken something down between them and brought her wonderfully close to him. And as he pondered on what those four days had brought forth, an inward voice seemed to tell him that it had not come upon him suddenly, this living, throbbing reality that set his brain a-whirl. Almost ever since he had first seen her there had been lurking in his heart, as yet unrecognised, an indefinable germ-like something, which had needed but the magic, vivifying touch of sympathy to burst forth into fullest, noblest life—unmistakable, all-assertive. One touch was all that was required, and it had come that morning from Ethel's hands. A strange power of love had with that touch sprung into being, and his dull, bachelor's heart was to-day beating to a new measure. He might, if he had not been so blind, have known that it was coming.

And, ah, the mockery of it all! For, following relentlessly on the full conception of his new-born passion, came the knowledge of its utter hopelessness. The bright vision of smiling eyes and of deft white fingers plying round his injured hand faded as he remembered how Heriot's complacent disregard of her sudden weakness that morning had appeared to affect Ethel, and how her fair face had clouded when, without a word of sympathy or

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concern, he rode steadily away. She would never have looked like that if she had not, in spite of all, cared for him still. Of that Waring was convinced; and he needed no prophet to tell him that unless something occurred to alter the girl's feelings towards Heriot it would be sheer waste of time for another man to strive to win her love.

The thought of the imperturbable Forest-Officer roused him. He rose suddenly from his seat, took two or three rapid, impatient turns up and down, stood for awhile irresolute, and then sat down listlessly at his writing-table, which had been brought out into the verandah. He felt he must do something to take his thoughts away from Ethel and Heriot. He pulled open one of the drawers; it was full of old letters, their serried ranks reminding him importunately that his home-correspondence had of late fallen

sadly into arrears. Almost involuntarily he picked up a pen and drew a sheet of paper towards him with the intention of beginning a letter to his mother, but the pain that followed on the first stroke he made reminded him that he was to do no writing for a day or two. Still, though the pen was forbidden him, there was no reason, he thought, why he should not distract his mind by reading some of his old letters. They would probably serve better even than a novel to carry him out of himself. He sank back presently in his easy chair with a thick bundle on the table beside him.

Waring was not given to reading his letters from home with any great degree of care, and it not infrequently occurred that, in the reperusal of his correspondence, he happened, with a feeling akin to surprise, on items of news which at the time had created no permanent impression on his mind,

and had in the interval been practically forgotten. The present scrutiny did not prove an exception to the rule. Before he had skimmed through half a score of the letters, drawn at random from the heap at his elbow, he had been reminded of as many facts, not a few of some little interest to himself, which, now that he saw them again in black and white, he recollected, but which had, up till then, to all intents and purposes slipped his memory. He was not, therefore, surprised when, in the middle of a letter written to him by his mother some three months before, he came suddenly upon a name he had been puzzling his head over at intervals during the previous fortyeight hours. It had conveyed nothing to him at the time he first read it, but, regarded in the light of subsequent events, it was now fraught with meaning, and the connection in which it was referred to by his mother was so

decidedly interesting that he sat bolt upright in his chair, with a sudden jerk and a subdued whistle, to re-read the passage in which it occurred.

Gertrude came back yesterday from Ventnor, where, as you know, she has been stopping with the Prices. The sea air seems to have done her a great deal of good. She has asked me to tell you that while at the Prices she met a girl, Millicent Dudley Devant, who is engaged to an officer in the Forest Department in Burmah. She has forgotten the name, but I daresay you may have met the man and heard of his engagement, so the news that Gertrude knows his fiancée may be of interest to you. Gertrude seems to have made great friends with the girl, who, she says, is charming.

That was all. It came back to Waring now. He recollected how, as he read, he had marvelled that his mother should, after all these years, still cherish the fond belief that everybody in Burmah was intimately acquainted with, and deeply interested in, everybody else in the country, and how at the same time he had made up his

mind that, of the half-dozen Forest-Officers he knew, the happy man alluded to in the letter was certainly not Heriot, whom he had always conceived to be as resolute a woman-hater as himself. Beyond this he had not at the time given the matter a thought. Now, however, the prominence given to a certain photograph in Heriot's room, coupled with its owner's unexpected development into a lady's man of the most pronounced type, put an altogether different complexion on the passage that Waring had read. The memory of Heriot's writing-table, as he had seen it last, strewn with three, if not four, letters exhibiting to all beholders the Ventnor post-mark, floated before his eyes. In the face of all that he had seen and now knew, he could not believe that the man who was engaged to his sister's charming acquaintance was other than the Forest-Officer of Tatkin. It could not well

be anyone else. The growing certainty that Heriot was that favoured mortal a pleasurable glow through Waring's frame, and under its soothing influence he found himself gradually readjusting his mental vision, till, before he knew it, he was again in that seraphic state out of which the shadow of his rival had just scared him. There was some chance for him with Miss Smart after all. If it was a fact that he was already plighted to Miss Dudley Devant, his friend could not, he thought, continue to persist in paying court to Ethel Smart. Even if he did, Ethel must of necessity learn in some way, and at some not very distant date, that the Forest-Officer's affections were already engaged, and ought surely to be prepared then to recognise in its proper light the devotion of other less brilliant but more single-hearted admirers. In any case Waring felt that the last few minutes had served to

clear his own field of action of some of its obstacles. He had something, at any rate, to go upon.

But, he went on a moment later to reflect, was it absolutely certain that Heriot was engaged? Might not there be even now some mistake, or, even supposing Heriot to be the man referred to in the letter, might not something have happened to put an end to the engagement? As he slowly pondered on the Forest-Officer's doings during the past few days, he could really imagine that they bore out one or other of the last two suppositions. Heriot was not the man to go out of his way to indulge in a mere empty flirtation. Waring's knowledge of his character was at best but superficial, yet it was profound enough to force upon him the conviction that his friend was not merely playing with Ethel Smart. He had kept his eyes open, and felt intuitively that the Forest-

Officer, under his cloak of idle nonchalance and even of occasional studied neglect, was bringing a grim earnestness to bear upon the business he had in hand—an earnestness which suggested some definite motive; and the question for the thoughtful Treasury - Officer was, What could that motive be? It was altogether a perplexing matter, and for the better part of that hot afternoon Waring lay in his chair with his eyes on the roof above, marshalling facts and striving to find some solution of a problem that seemed to present a fresh difficulty from whichever point of view it was looked at.

About four o'clock the object of his puzzled thoughts mounted the verandah steps, strolled towards Waring, sank into a chair near him, and shouted for his tea. He looked so insufferably clean and complacent that Waring longed for an oppurtunity to ruffle his

composure, and felt that he could go to any lengths, even to a reference to Miss Dudley Devant, to effect this end.

It took some little time for Heriot to bring his glass to bear upon Waring. 'What's the matter with your hand?' he asked.

'Strained my thumb this morning stopping Miss Smart's pony,' returned his companion.

'Ah, to be sure,' murmured the Forest-Officer; 'I had almost forgotten. No other casualties, I trust.' He gazed critically at the bandage on Waring's hand as he spoke. It seemed as though he had observed the monogram on the handkerchief, and was trying to decipher the letters from where he sat. Waring made no attempt to conceal the end; he only trusted that the handkerchief would be identified. But if Heriot recognised the bandage he did not show that he had done so,

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and presently leant back in his chair, yawning.

There was silence for a minute or two. Then Heriot shifted his legs slowly, and called again to his boy for tea. Almost immediately after this Waring, who had made a sudden resolution, found himself addressing his uncommunicative neighbour. 'You remember the photograph I noticed in your room the other day, — Miss Devant's?' His words came slowly and with a little effort, for he was not sure how Heriot would take what he was going to say.

' Ĭ do.'

'I thought then that I'd seen or heard the name before, but couldn't remember where.'

'Ah.'

'Well, I've found out since where I had come across the name; it was in a letter. My sister appears to have met Miss Devant at Ventnor

last summer,'—Heriot was silent and Waring continued in a dry monotone—' and to have heard about her engagement.'

Still no word came from Heriot. He was leaning back in his chair with his eyebrows raised, apparently interested in nothing but the fact that his boy was slowly approaching across the verandah with his tea. The tray was deposited on a small table by Heriot's side; there was a rattle of tea-cups, and the servant withdrew. Heriot picked up a lump of sugar and gazed at it reflectively. 'Yes,' he said in a tone as of encouragement, but without looking up at Waring.

'About her engagement to,—to you,' continued Waring.

Heriot lifted the milk-jug with measured deliberation and poured out a small quantity of milk into his cup; he was always very particular about putting the milk in before the tea. 'You don't say so! To think of that!' he said impassively. 'How small the world is.'

## CHAPTER IX

About a month had elapsed since the events chronicled in the preceding chapter. The festive season of Christmas had come, and was passing amid most commendable efforts at gaiety on the part of the residents of Tatkin and of the surrounding district, and sunrise on the first day of the new year found Waring seated over his early breakfast of tea and toast, taking stock of the achievements of the past twelve months, and speculating, in no very roseate humour, as to what the coming twelve had in store for him. It was a cold morning. The sun had not yet dissipated the night mists which brooded white and dank over the Station, and

Waring was sufficiently chilly to be glad to take refuge in the grateful folds of a thick dressing-gown, an article of attire he but rarely wore. It was barely half-past six, and, considering the excesses of the last few days, he was not without a feeling of complacency at being up and doing so early. festivities at the Smarts', where the whole Station had collected the night before to see the old year out, had been continued until the new year was several hours old, and it seemed to Waring as though he had hardly closed his eyes between the sheets, before the sound of some one moving in heavy boots about a room near his roused him by its persistency, and he had himself risen and called down the dim verandah for his early tea.

As now he sat by his table, plunged in a profound reverie, the steps of the unseen wearer of the boots resounded in the verandah, and from his chair he saw Heriot stalking past the curtain, dressed in riding-costume. The footsteps descended the stair, and, after a short interval, Waring heard the clatter of a pony's hoofs, muffled by the mist, die away in the distance. He did not need to be told with what object Heriot had left the mess. It was the same, he could assure himself, as that with which he had ridden out the last two mornings. The Forest-Officer had, without a word of previous intimation, left Tatkin for camp a couple of days after his ride with Ethel and Waring, and had not reappeared at headquarters till the afternoon of Christmas Eve. He had taken an unobtrusive part in the Christmas festivities, had competed ingloriously in the lawn-tennis tournament, and had played, but without distinguishing himself, in the great polo-match, in which Tatkin, thanks to Pym's superfine play, had inflicted a terrible defeat on the champions of Thayetchaung.

For the rest, he had been as assiduous as before in his attentions to the Deputy-Commissioner's sister, and had succeeded in filling Waring's mind with a vague sense of depression and disgust.

The latter's suit had progressed but lamely while Heriot was absent in camp. Ethel had been kindness itself to him during the past four weeks, had from time to time accepted the offer of his escort on morning rides, had asked him on several occasions to tea, and had invariably treated him with the most friendly graciousness; but it was the old story. Her kindness was, he could feel, dictated more by gratitude for what he had done than by any tender sentiment, and he was certain that her heart was, through all, with the wanderer in camp who had so unexpectedly deserted her. Hence it was that he had not availed himself as freely of the opportunities offered him as he

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might have, and had as yet gained no inkling of whether Ethel was even aware of Heriot's engagement to Miss Dudley Devant. He himself, proud soul, could not find it in him to breathe a word of that matter to any one. If there was really an engagement, Heriot's behaviour in the past had shown that he had no desire that its existence should be generally known; and for his own part he was not the one to babble mischievously, even when silence was to his own disadvantage, though at the same time he had to confess that he would have been greatly relieved to learn that the news had been communicated to Ethel otherwise than through himself. How, moreover, he asked himself again and again, could he in any way refer to the matter when he himself was not absolutely certain that Heriot was pledged to his sister's friend? The Forest-Officer had made no attempt to deny that he

was engaged. He had not tried to continue the dialogue with which the last chapter terminated, yet he had shown no anxiety to have the subject changed, and it was left to Waring, at the close of the pause that followed Heriot's final remark, to break the awkward silence by starting a new topic of conversation. It would have seemed to any one who had been listening as though it were immaterial to Heriot whether the relations in which he stood to a young woman in the Isle of Wight were known or not, though Waring felt almost certain that this was not the case, and it was partly the very fact that Heriot was, so to say, at his mercy, and did not expect him to deny himself the rare pleasure of publishing abroad what he had learnt, that tied his stubborn tongue.

As he passed Heriot's conduct in review, this misty new year's morning, he decided, as he had often decided before, that the only explanation of which it admitted was that the engagement no longer existed. That this was so had become a sort of conviction with It alone, it seemed to him, could account for the significant fact that Heriot, since his return from camp, had continued to haunt Ethel with the same persistent determination he had exhibited before Christmas. It would be exactly like him, Waring thought, to allow everybody to suppose that he was plighted to Miss Dudley Devant when in reality he was nothing of the sort, merely in order to encourage others to entertain hopes which he knew would be vain. But then, might he not do the same in any case, even though—ah! another idea had suddenly gained hold of the thinker as he turned over in his mind the vagaries that Heriot's peculiar temperament might lead him into. Might not the engagement still hold good, and might not

Heriot's whole action in behaving as he did towards Ethel have been prompted solely by a desire to irritate and dishearten himself, or, for the matter of that, any one else who ventured to cherish hopes with regard to Miss Smart? The idea had occurred to him vaguely before, and now it struck Waring as strange that he should not have thought seriously of it till then. The more he remembered of the Forest-Officer and his peculiarities, the more he realized how very possible it was that that perverse personage was, after all, still engaged, and had been sustained, in that earnestness of purpose which characterised his attitude towards Ethel, by nothing higher than the prospect of exasperating some lovelorn individual (like himself) who would willingly have worshipped at her shrine. That must be the explanation, and if so, what a fool the fellow must think him for hanging back when he

knew so much. Yes, he had been a precious fool not to have thought of it before. At all events, if this was the solution of the difficulty, his own course, he reflected, would be clear enough. Our friend had quite made up his mind by this time that, if Heriot had, and could have, no serious intentions towards the Deputy-Commissioner's sister, he himself would, so soon as all doubts as to the Forest-Officer's engagement were set at rest, make his unflagging devotion show how terribly settled his own resolves were. And there was no time to be lost; if anything was to be done it would have to be done without delay. It was already January, and he had applied for, and expected to get, his leave early in March. He felt that he could not quit Tatkin without having made some definite attempt to come to an understanding with Miss Smart, -for who could say whether he would be again posted to Tatkin on his return,

or whether he would ever have another opportunity of meeting Ethel in Burmah? And, before he could make a real beginning, much had to be done in the way of clearing the ground.

In this strain he mused till the sun. which had risen high above the palms, scattered the last shreds of the morning mist and sent a strong, hot shaft of light across the verandah to his feet. With the sudden burst of sunshine he awoke from his reverie, to find Heriot creaking up the steps, brown and jubilant, from his morning ride. The breakfast-hour was near, and after breakfast the duties of the day were to commence. There were to be sports for the Police, Civil and Military, that afternoon, and the morning was to be devoted by himself and the Battalion Commandant to putting the ground in order and arranging a programme of events. That evening the Station was to be entertained at dinner by the bachelors at the Civil

mess, and, as mess-secretary, the responsibility for the successful issue of the feast rested on his shoulders. His work was cut out for him. It was time for him to get out of the dressing-gown, that already felt too warm, and bathe and dress.

He was sitting that evening, tired out, resting, as best he could, in the interval between the sports and dinner, when a bundle of letters was brought to him by a phlegmatic chuprassie. It was the English mail, just arrived. In order to take the bundle into his hand he had to put down an opened note that had been brought to him a few minutes before. It was from Ethel, and contained a pressing invitation to join in an expedition that she and her brother intended making a few days later to a pagoda of some interest several miles out of Tatkin. Heriot was to be one of the party. They were

to sleep a night in the rest-house, the writer said; camp-furniture would have to be provided, and a hope was expressed that the journey would prove a great success. Waring had been debating how to answer this missive when he was interrupted by the arrival of the mail. If Heriot had not been going, he would have had no hesitation in accepting. Now that his plan of action was generally outlined, he could not but acknowledge that the expedition would afford him exactly the opportunities he desired for clearing the ground. But the prospect of Heriot's presence made him pause. His frame of mind was not so hopeful as it had been in the morning. If the future were to be judged of by the past, the Forest - Officer would certainly act towards Ethel during the excursion as though he were absolutely free; and, look at it what way he would, Waring could not yet bring himself to the point

of letting Miss Smart know all he knew, or suspected. If only he had a certainty to go upon he might have felt compelled, in fairness to Ethel, to let the fact of the engagement be known; but so strangely was his nature compounded that, in the absence of full knowledge, he shrank from speaking to the girl on a subject that touched him so nearly, as he would have shrunk from some mean, underhand action; and he felt certain that, so long as Ethel was ignorant of Heriot's engagement, his own presence on the expedition would be as little appreciated by her as it had appeared to be on a certain memorable ride. He would only be in the way. And yet, -things had altered since that ride. She knew him, liked him, better now than then, and perhaps Heriot would himself tell her of his engagement; he must see that this sort of thing could not go on for ever. He decided on the whole to

suspend judgment till he had looked at the letters that had just been put into his hand.

They were not all for him. His share consisted of a letter from his sister and a *Punch*, both of which he put aside to read at his leisure. For Mullintosh there was a *Sporting Times* and what looked like a tradesman's bill; for Pym a couple of post-cards, and for Heriot a letter on thick paper, the superscription in a jerky, feminine hand. Waring glanced at the postmark on the last, as he handed the bundle back to the *chuprassie*, and read the word *Ventnor*.

That settled him. It was a small matter, but in certain dubious moods small matters often influence us far more effectually than great. The sight of the envelope bearing that tell-tale legend, which seemed to come like a living voice of protest from afar, clamouring to be heard, sent a fresh

wave of feeling over him. How it was he could not say, but it seemed to him as though after this Heriot must let Ethel know exactly in what light he was to be looked upon. Some instinct told him that something must happen during the excursion to the pagoda, that things must come to a head, and that all would in the end be made clear. He felt a sudden determination that there should be-that he would make a way out of all this heart-breaking tangle. If all went right the next few days ought to see a finish of the business, so far as Heriot was concerned. He would do his best to see that they did; and then,—then, if his supposition was correct, and Heriot had only been putting him on the rack for his own private delectation, he would be free to press his own suit, uninterrupted; and where, he asked himself gleefully, would there be more freedom and less fear of interruption than on the projected expedition? Sanguine, confiding youth! He sat down forthwith and incontinently penned a reply to Ethel, accepting her invitation. Then he set to and dressed for dinner with a feeling that the ground was being cleared for him.

Heriot was given the letter from Ventnor shortly after it had left Waring's hands. It was not a long epistle. It took him barely two minutes to read, for he skimmed it rapidly, as though he knew beforehand pretty well what the writer was going to say. For all that, however, it deserved more than the cursory inspection that Heriot gave it, for there was a deal of emotion concentrated into its three pages of straggling, girlish writing. It ended with the following words:—

I know I ought to have written last week, but I couldn't realize it at first or believe it was true, and I couldn't somehow write till after it was too

late to catch the mail. I don't realize it yet, though I suppose I ought to have known what was coming by your last few letters. Still, I suppose you know best, and if you can't care for me any more, I suppose the only thing to be done is to think no more of each other. But it does seem hard,—so hard.

This rather pathetic document was signed *Millicent Dudley Devant*, and, had he been privileged to see them, its contents would no doubt have furnished Waring with food for much thoughtful comment. But at the moment he was too busily engaged on a letter of his own to think of what the contents of Heriot's might be.

Heriot was not profoundly moved by his correspondent's outburst of grief. He shrugged his shoulders once or twice as he read, but to all appearances he was affected less by the general tone of the letter than by one or two orthographic errors that he noticed and scored under with his finger-nail as he read. He stroked his moustache pensively when the perusal was completed; then he placed the letter in his pocket and whistled softly to himself as he polished his eyeglass, and as he whistled an observer might have seen that his face brightened a little. The observer, had he been acquainted with the facts of the case, might well have surmised that, now that he was off with the old love, the susceptible Forest - Officer was calculating magnificent opportunities for consummating fresh conquests would be afforded by the approaching picnic to the Thonzè pagoda. He would not have been very far wrong if he had.

It was a coincidence, but, as he dressed for dinner, Heriot too was thinking how nicely the ground was being cleared for him.

Truly, with all this in the air, the expedition to the pagoda promised to be fruitful of situations that might prove interesting.

## CHAPTER X

Minywa was neither a large nor a conspicuous village. On a dark night, after lights were out, you might, if you came from Tatkin and the west, have walked through poor little Minywa without knowing it. Dense bamboo jungle pressed close in upon it on the sunset side as well as on the north and south; you stepped at one breath from the jungle-path eastward into the village - street, and there was nothing to mark where the one ended and the other began. The growth on either hand fell back a little, it is true, just before the turn that landed you in front of the first of the mat-hovels; but that was only what was to be expected, for there was a steady downward trend in the path, and it was evident that the end of the long ridge had come, and that there was a slope to the river, on which it was natural that there should be patches of clearer ground. The village boasted of no stockade; nothing divided the road from the habitations on each side. A few hundred steps carried you past the ten or twelve low thatched huts, which seemed anxious to shrink away from observation, into the protecting shelter of the feathery green; and going eastward, if it were dusk and you were not on the lookout, you were half down the slope before you realised that it was not a mere clearing you had come through, and that there was nothing now save a narrow belt of open ground between you and the next interminable wilderness of bamboo-stems. Down the slope the bamboo-clumps stood thinner; then came the stretch of level

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rice-land,—the sole reason for the hamlet's existence—and then the river under the trees at the farther side, with jungle beyond, and ever more jungle along the crests, as far as the eye could reach. There was not another village, that way, for thirty miles.

The stream was, for Burmah, a very insignificant little trickle. At Minywa the channel was narrow, some twenty yards across: the banks, though low, were steep and the trees nearly met overhead; but even in the rains the water at the ford was never more than waist-deep. On the day early in January with which we are for the moment concerned, it was a good deal lower; in fact, in the deepest part it did not reach the knees of a Burman who was splashing leisurely across it from the east towards the village. The forenoon was well advanced, and though the morning had been cold, the sun was by this time high and hot, and the

cool water lapped so refreshingly round the walker's dusty shins that he did not hurry across. He was a long, lean individual with sheepish, good-natured eyes and a large mouth, its proportions accentuated rather than hidden by a scanty black moustache. He had neither jacket nor head-covering, his glossy hair being carelessly knotted at the crown; over his shoulder hung a red Shan tasselled bag and a coarse blue and white cloth, that earlier in the morning he had worn wrapped round the upper part of his body, while his waist was encircled by a width of material of almost the same pattern; this he had tucked up as high as possible before entering the stream, though the precaution was almost unnecessary, for the ripples did not reach anywhere near the lowest flourish of the blue tattooed pattern that extended downward from his waist to his knees. He gave a grunt and a final kick with

each foot in the limpid flow as he reached the farther side, then, tucking his knife into his waistcloth behind, so as to leave his hands free, he scrambled up the bank and emerged upon the paddy-plain.

There was more to be seen of Minywa from the east than from the west. The flattened, cowering thatchroofs seemed, from here, as from above, fearful of obtruding themselves on the gaze; but, standing on the rice-fields, one could see something that was not visible from the jungle-path,—a line of plantain-tufts stretching away to the right of the village, with the pagoda and monastery (kyaung) posted at its farther extremity. There was no overlooking the monastery, the pride and glory of Minywa, that towered with its quaint sharp gables and carved projections over the bamboo-clumps. It had been built many years before, when Minywa was much larger than

it is now, by an old resident, a conscientious timber-contractor, who, on retiring from business, had made the pious resolve that the particular act of merit, which was to ensure him after death a creditable transmigration, should be outwardly as imposing as the transactions by which he had amassed his wealth were shady, and, in pursuance of that resolve, had raised a pile that was for long the talk of the countryside. Kyaungtaga Tun Waing had died several years ago, in the earnest expectation of starting a fresh existence, if not as a monk, at any rate (and the alternative would perhaps, on the whole, be more satisfactory) as a successful owner of saw-mills with a large connection. His own residence, built half-way between the village and the monastery, had fallen to pieces: his children had migrated elsewhere; and there was nothing left now to testify to his unique knowledge of all

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matters connected with timber but the old kyaung itself, which still stood erect on its mighty teak-wood posts and had a wonderful capacity for subsisting, and indeed thriving, on a minimum of repairs. The toothless old gentleman who had been installed, as presiding monk, when the monastery was built, had long since, like his patron, gone the way of all flesh, and U Ananda reigned in his stead. Now U Ananda was a gaingdauk, or archdeacon of the Burmese Buddhist church, subordinate in spiritual matters to no one but the thathanabaing, or archbishop, and to his own  $gaing - \delta k$ , or bishop, neither of whom exercised any control to speak of over him. He was fairly shrewd, moderately respected, and very much feared; so that, all things considered, he was somewhat of a power in the land, for though he had been a steady opponent of British rule on its first introduction, and had acquired a name

for his devotion to the old cause, he had since then had the good sense to learn, earlier than some, that kicking against the pricks was not the most profitable or healthful form of exercise, and had at times even been of assistance to the authorities. So skilfully indeed had he played his cards hitherto, that, while secretly known to the people of the Chindwin as inclined to sympathise with the disaffected, he had given the Government no shadow of an excuse for turning him out of his monastery; and if the truth is to be told, he figured in the Deputy-Commissioner's reports as 'an ex-firebrand who has been gradually won over by British tolerance to a right way of thinking.'

But U Ananda had not yet been so fully won over as Smart and his predecessors imagined; and nothing could have shown this more clearly than the fact that our long Burman friend, after crossing the belt of rice-land, where

the yellow paddy-stubble bristled on the hard-baked clay, instead of making straight for the village, branched off up a path to the right and bent his steps to where the topmost spire of the monastery rose above the plantains. So far he had met no one since fording the stream, save a pair of village maidens laden with red earthenware pots who were strolling, one behind the other, down to the river to draw water and bathe, and these he had passed with the briefest of salutations. The couple had eyed him askance as he approached, edging to the farther side of the path, as though uncertain what to make of him; but his answer to their question,—'Where are you going to, Shwe Myaing?'—though curt, was friendly, and they passed on and were soon talking and tittering (not, it must be confessed, very musically) behind him. Shwe Myaing knew pretty well what they were chattering about, and

the knowledge that he had of late become an object of such interest to his fellow-villagers was by no means displeasing to his vanity. He also knew why it was that a small brown boy, with big eyes and a shaven poll, whom he caught up on his way to the monastery, gave a sudden exclamation of terror and showed a disposition to drop his lacquer-work bowl and bolt into the jungle when he saw who it was that was standing by him. It needed but a laugh and a word or two, however, to completely reassure the urchin, and he was presently pattering along in the tall man's wake and answering his questions in a voice that quavered, but from lack of breath and not from fear; for, after all, little Po Lu was ten, and old enough by this time to know that there was really no reason why he should be frightened of his uncle Shwe Myaing, even though the latter had of late contracted the

habit of living out in the jungle with doubtful characters, and seemed always to be connected in people's minds with that alarming personage Chet. Through the plantain-grove they wended their way together, and before Shwe Myaing had had time to hear half the latest village-gossip an opening in a rough bamboo-fence brought uncle and nephew out on to a cleared square of dry levelled earth which formed the enclosure of the monastery. To their right, at one corner of the fenced quadrangle, was a pagoda, built of brick, plastered and rigorously whitewashed: the sides of the enclosure were lined with crazy wooden zayats, or resthouses, and in front of them the teakwood piles and walls of the monastery stood out dark against a background of sunlit foliage. A monastic stillness reigned over the precincts, till a sleek black pariah dog, roused by the near footsteps, uncurled itself from a dusty siesta

by the entrance to bark at the new-comer. Immediately, as though by magic, the quarter rang with the sound of hoarse canine voices; but a clod of earth, deftly hurled by Po Lu, silenced the inhospitable cur; the din subsided as quickly as it had arisen, and the man and boy crossed the open space before the monastery unchallenged.

There were yellow-clad forms stationary, or in sedate motion, on the open railless verandah of the main building, and underneath, amid the forest of rounded piles, a crowd of small shorn boys, each one ridiculously like his neighbour, was squatted, engaged in a perfunctory washing of plates and bowls. Po Lu made straight for his companions, who stared curiously but without fear at the visitor; but Shwe Myaing, being by no means anxious to attract attention, did not follow the boy to the monastery, but glided away to one of

the rest-houses, where a few minutes later he might have been seen, seated in a remote shady corner, demolishing with ravenous appetite a huge pile of sticky rice that his nephew had placed before him on a portion of plantain-leaf. Coming as an emissary from Bo Chet's camp, he had the best of reasons for not wishing to court publicity, even in his native village; yet it would have surprised and amused a spectator to note how swiftly the tidings of his coming were diffused through the building, and how careful all were to conceal, and at the same time satisfy, their curiosity with regard to him, and to avoid giving any indication of knowledge that might hereafter be considered compromising. An old lady, who had brought an offering to the monastery and was returning to the village, shuffled past the rest-house with many a sidelong glance in, for she had overheard a fragment of what Po

Lu was saying to his companions; and a couple of young priests clambered down from the platform to the ground, ostensibly to look after the boys below, but really to obtain a stealthy glimpse of the dacoit as he bent over his food. Shwe Myaing, however, paid but indifferent heed to his observers. He was enjoying his first full meal for a fortnight, and so long as his hunger was appeased and no actual harm came to him (and of actual harm there was very little danger) he did not much care what people thought; so he looked away with a suppressed grin and crammed his mouth afresh with the glutinous lumps of grain. But he turned when a few minutes later a well-known husky voice called him by name, and saw standing opposite him in the sunshine the man he wanted to see, a short, stout elderly Burman monk, swathed in the orthodox yellow robes of the Buddhist priesthood

which left his right arm and shoulder hare.

'Your Reverence!' he exclaimed, rapidly changing his negligent attitude for the more decorous posture that a layman was expected to assume when addressing an ecclesiastic of the Buddhist church.

U Ananda chewed in silence at his mouthful of betel and looked severely into the upturned eyes of the Burman. The archdeacon was certainly not outwardly prepossessing, for his face was coarse and thick-lipped, and his large ears stood out bat-like at each side of his close-cropped head. 'So you have come, Shwe Myaing,' he said after a pause.

٠T have come, your Reverence,' Shwe Myaing made answer, waiting for a lead and wondering what his Reverence would say to his presence there. It was a matter of no little importance to him, for he knew well that the village would take their cue from the monastery, and that his reception at Minywa would be friendly or the reverse as the priest dictated.

'And you have come from,—from the east?' pursued U Ananda. The words conveyed a statement of fact, not a question, though the interrogative particle was used.

'From the east,' said Shwe Myaing submissively. This was as good and safe an expression as any he could think of for the locality from which he had come.

'And what have you come here for,—to buy rice?'

'To buy rice,' came like an echo from Shwe Myaing's lips.

The priest nodded a solemn approval, and Shwe Myaing's face brightened. To a European the words would have sounded perfectly innocent, but as a matter of fact the whole conversation was nothing more or less than a pleas-

ing little farce, into the spirit of which the audience fully entered. The crowd of wide-eyed schoolboys and gaping deacons, whom the dialogue had attracted to the spot, knew well whence Shwe Myaing had come and what his business was in Minywa; but they also knew, as well as the two speakers themselves, how necessary it was to keep up appearances.

- 'When do you return?' the arch-deacon went on.
- 'To-day, at sunset,' answered Shwe Myaing; 'if I can get rice,' he added, as an after-thought.
  - 'How much rice do you want?'
  - 'Two baskets, your Reverence.'
- 'I cannot say whether you will get so much. The harvest has not been plentiful; but you can try, can you not?'
  - 'I can try, your Reverence.'
  - 'Good. Is all well in the east?'
  - 'All is not well, your Reverence,'

said Shwe Myaing. 'The crops are not good and there is much sickness, but with food things will be better. We only look to your Eminence for succour. The saya-gyi——'1 Here he broke off on a look from the priest, which showed him that his last two words were superfluous, but after a pause, during which U Ananda munched grimly, he repeated in plaintive tones, 'With food things will be better.'

'Well, you may see what you can get here; but, remember, not more than two baskets,' and the priest, turning on his heel as a sign that the interview was at an end, clambered into the monastery with as much dignity as was compatible with his squat figure and the cramped position he was forced to assume to scale the

<sup>1</sup> Saya or Saya-gyi is used by 2 Burman in speaking of, or to, any one of superior rank or position; it is equivalent to huzoor in Hindustanee, your Honour or his Honour.

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primitive ladder-like staircase. The throng of inquisitive youths and boys hung for a time open-mouthed round the rest-house, and then, realising that there was nothing more to be seen or heard, dispersed by twos or threes to sleep or smoke the hot hours away, while Shwe Myaing, left to himself, settled with a sigh of satisfaction into a dark corner to try conclusions with a prodigious cheroot. Before many puffs he was fast asleep, breathing as evenly as any child, his head pillowed on his cloth, a shamefaced grin still lurking in the corners of his big mouth.

A drowsy silence seemed to permeate the atmosphere. In half an hour it seemed as though all the human occupants of the monastery had followed the example of Bo Chet's emissary. Only the beasts were awake. Before long one of the vagrant dogs, that hung like shabby, unclean spirits about the enclosure, approached and

began surreptitiously to devour the scanty remains of Shwe Myaing's meal, the few gummy mouthfuls of rice he had been unable to devour before sleep overtook him. The scavenger was not, however, left long in undisturbed possession of his spoil; his movements had not escaped the observation of a godless brace of bright-eyed crows, black with a physical and moral blackness, but comely withal after the comeliness of their kind, who before long were bobbing backwards and forwards in his vicinity, taking it in turn to entice him from his meal. Their fiendish skill proclaimed them inveterate in crime. No sooner had the unfortunate cur made a dash for one of his obscene sidling tormentors, than the other hopped in jeeringly from the flank and abstracted a white morsel or two, and every time he leaped angrily out to annihilate the second robber, he had to return baffled, to find that the

first had in its turn secured a beakful of food. These tactics were kept up till the rice was finished and the victim hoarse with fruitless snarling; and not till then did the diabolical birds leave him, and flutter, shouting in noisy triumph, to the nearest jack-tree, there to compare notes and indulge in mutual invective. But Shwe Myaing heard nothing of the flapping and the growls at his side; he was in a state of absolute exhaustion, in which he would have slept through the most riotous farce and been unmoved by the noisiest orchestra. Later on in the afternoon, however, when the sun was dipping towards the western line of jungle, he awoke with a start, stretched himself, yawned and, casting a hasty look around him, picked up his knife and cloth and slunk off in the direction of the village.

It was dusk when he returned to the monastery, followed by a sturdy villager who carried, slung at each end of a bamboo-pole, a basket full of husked rice. There was a broader grin than usual on the robber's face as he halted within the enclosure. Thanks to his interview with the priest earlier in the day he had found it easy enough to fulfil his delicate mission. How he had secured his two baskets full of rice it is needless to describe here in detail; but, as Bo Chet was not in the habit, when he sent into a village for supplies, of providing his messenger with cash, it may be inferred that, in saying that he had come to buy rice, Shwe Myaing had been indulging in one of the graceful euphemisms to which the Burmese are, as a race, addicted. The main thing was that the rice was forthcoming, and that he had transacted his business without friction and expeditiously. The coolie, who had been pressed temporarily into the great outlaw's employ, was on the other hand less satisfied with himself and his day's

work. He knew that the offence of assisting to supply dacoits with food was one that was not passed over lightly by the authorities, and he had an uncomfortable premonition of possible collisions with patrols in the jungle. Wherefore he grumbled a little while his principal was absent, bidding a formal farewell to the archdeacon; yet he was too much of a Burman not to join heartily in the laugh that went up when one of the bolder wits at the monastery comforted him, in the hearing of one or two choice spirits, with the assurance that, when Bo Chet came into his kingdom, he would surely make him Governor of the Chindwin Provinces as a reward for trusty services rendered, and then proceeded to prostrate himself before the prospective ruler.

Shwe Myaing did not hear this sally, or he would have giggled as loudly as any of the others. He was at the

moment squatting humbly before U Ananda in a small inner chamber of the monastery. The room was dark, except for the light of a small smoky oil-lamp which cast a feeble glow on the priest's fat sensuous face. The rough plank floor was covered with two or three gaudy European rugs, and the walls and posts were dotted with a selection of pictures from English illustrated journals. The two were alone, and the fact was sufficient to account for the greater freedom of their speech.

'I have got the rice, your Reverence,' said Shwe Myaing, pressing his joined palms against the floor, 'and I am now going back,—to the east.'

'It is well,' replied the priest. 'Tell me now, Shwe Myaing, how goes it with the saya?'

'The saya has recovered from his fever, and can eat, when there is rice; but Shwe Lan is ill again. The wound he got at Thayetbin has reopened and

he suffers great pain. Nothing does the sore place good but the yellow powder the saya-gyi once got from the Government dispensary at Tatkin; but that is all finished now.'

- 'Does the saya-gyi's skill avail nothing to give his followers relief?'
- 'He has applied leaves to the wound, but it will not heal. He goes to-morrow to Thonzè to get more drugs from Maung Waik.'
- 'Thonzè,' said U Ananda, 'let him take care how he goes to Thonzè. I have heard that the Deputy-Commissioner himself goes there soon to settle who is to be headman of the village. It would not do for the saya-gyi and the aye-baing 1 to meet, would it? You know the rewards that have been offered.'
- 'I know them,' said Shwe Myaing, a sullen look creeping over his face, but

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> An official of high rank answering to our Deputy-Commissioner.

the priest went on with unction. 'For Nga Chet one thousand rupees, for Nga Le and Nga Cho five hundred each, for Shwe Lan two hundred and fifty, and for Shwe Myaing, — I have forgotten,—how much for Shwe Myaing?'

'One hundred,' said the individual in question, rather sulkily. It was degrading enough to know that this absurdly low price had been put upon his head, and to have the figure cast constantly in his teeth by his more expensive companions; the humiliation was twofold when the sneer came from a mere monk, a man who had never carried his life in his hand, had never even missed a meal in freedom's cause. If it had not been for the stupid affair with the old woman at Thayetbin, he would not have hesitated a moment to turn Queen's evidence; but that little episode had, he knew well, cut him off from all hope of mercy at the hands of a pig-headed Government that never would realise how apt young bloods are to be carried away with boyish excitement, and how marvellously the amusement of prodding obstinate ladies with a spear grows upon one. As it was, he could not help thinking that it would perhaps be the wisest thing to silence his colleagues' scoffs for good and all by some exploit that would enhance his value in the Government's eyes. In for a penny, in for a pound; the old woman was certainly not worth hanging for, and hanged he certainly would be if he were caught. Now if he could only account for some valuable Government official, say the Deputy-Commissioner, or,-but the priest's voice broke in upon his meditations.

'One thousand, five hundred, two hundred and fifty, one hundred,' repeated U Ananda. 'Don't let the rewards be forgotten, and remember that even in Minywa there may be those who would like to earn them. See that there is no further demand for rice before the rains. Who goes with you to carry the rice to the saya-gyi?'

- 'Ko Meik Gyi goes with your servant. He waits down below. All is ready.'
- 'Go quickly then, and tell the saya-gyi that the bearer of the rice is not to be let or hindered in returning. It will not be wise to anger the only village that supports the jungle-dwellers, will it?'
- 'No, your Reverence, it will not,' said Shwe Myaing; and then with a parting obeisance he retired as quickly as possible from the awe-inspiring presence of the archdeacon.

The path down to the river branched off from the track leading from the monastery to the village, at a point about a hundred yards from the enclosure. For these hundred yards, therefore, Shwe Myaing's road lay

along the path to the village, and thus it was that a minute or two after his start he had an opportunity, himself unseen, of watching a cavalcade that was coming from the hamlet to the monastery, and of thanking his stars that he had left not later than he did. He had sent Ko Meik Gyi with the baskets of rice on ahead, while he stopped behind to get a handful of cheroots from one of the idlers at the monastery; he was hurrying along to catch his man up, and had come near the branching of the roads, when he suddenly became aware of approaching horses, and had only just time to dodge into the brushwood to avoid being seen by a rider who was making at a rapid trot from the direction of the village for the monastery. It was a European; the lines of his helmet stood out clear, and by the glint of a steel scabbard in the moonlight the robber, as he crouched in the jungle, judged that it was a

policeman. There were sounds of more horsemen behind, and before he emerged, trembling in every limb, Shwe Myaing had seen half a dozen mounted Burman police pass spectre-like after their leader towards the monastery. Immediately the last of the riders had passed, and he was satisfied that the coast was clear, the outlaw slipped out on to the path and sped down the turning to the river with a conviction that, whatever he might do later, the present was not a suitable opportunity for getting the reward for his own capture raised. The coolie was just visible on the rice-fields in front of him, a dark figure staggering under his load through the dim moonlight, and a few seconds sufficed to catch him up and hurry him, mildly protesting, across the stream into the jungle on the farther side. Then, and not tell then, did Shwe Myaing stop to ponder on the narrowness of his escape, and to congratulate

himself on all things having turned out as they had.

There could be no doubt who the police were after; even one hundred rupees were apparently worth a little exertion. They had got some definite information, it was clear. Some one must have gone into Tatkin to tell of his arrival that morning in Minywa. Who that some one could have been he could not for the moment even hazard a guess; he could only conjecture that it was some evilly-disposed person in the village itself, or more probably some stranger who knew him by sight and was not afraid of angering the archdeacon. If this were the case there had been no time lost either by the informer or the police, for it was a good ten miles from Minywa to the District headquarters. Truly there was something alarming in the energy of these white folk; the Thonzè sergeant would certainly not have come so quick,

though he was a good deal nearer Minywa. However, all was well that ended well. He knew that the police would not get much out of the villagers of Minywa, nearly all of whom had friends or relations who either still were or had been in Bo Chet's gang, and that he himself was in no immediate danger of being pursued; and he reflected that, even if he was followed, he had by this time got a good start and ought to have no difficulty in shaking his pursuers off. So he called a halt for a moment in a moonlit space to light cheroots, one for himself and one for Ko Meik Gyi, whom he had, for good reasons of his own, not told of his adventure; and presently the pair were jogging along, talking cheerily, through the lights and shades of the jungle towards the robbers' camp.

## CHAPTER XI

THE Smarts' visit to the pagoda was not to be one of recreation only. The Deputy-Commissioner and his friends had no intention of foregoing, if it could be helped, travelling - allowance, that most useful supplement to the hardworked official's salary; and therefore in good time it was discovered that Heriot had a plantation in the vicinity of Thonzè to visit, that Smart was expected to ascertain the validity of the claim of two applicants for the appointment of thugyi, or headman, of that village, and that it was Waring's bounden duty to write a report on the pagoda, which would entail a personal inspection of the building. As Trea-

sury-Officer the last-named had been finding, since his arrival in Tatkin, that it was his lot to perform many of the multifarious odd jobs that are in Upper Burmah, as elsewhere in India, daily thrust upon the ill-starred District-Officer; and so useful had our young friend proved himself that when, a day or two before the expedition, Smart received from Government a request for the submission, before February 28th, of a list of objects of historical and antiquarian interest in his District, a short report on such of the pagodas enumerated in the list as were thought sufficiently important to be administered by trusts, and detailed proposals for the creation of such trusts, he unhesitatingly transferred the papers to the Treasury - Officer 'for favour of early report,' adding in his own hand below the official endorsement, 'T .- O. might make a beginning by taking up the Thonzè pagoda, one of the most im-

portant in the District, on Monday next. The Civil Surgeon will be placed temporarily in charge of the Treasury.' The report was duly commenced by Waring on the afternoon of the arrival at Thonzè, after he had viewed and jotted down the architectural details of the structure, and had questioned the residents of the village on its history and on the trust-scheme; but, for reasons which have still to be narrated, it was never brought by him to completion. Still it was progressing merrily enough that first afternoon, and so engrossed was Waring in his task of compilation that when, at about three o'clock, he still showed no signs of flagging, he was brought by Ethel Smart to book for his unsociability, and asked what it was that was engaging his attention to the exclusion of all earthly matters.

They had left Tatkin behind them in the mist that morning about seven

o'clock, and a two hours' ride, first along winding sandy lanes hedged about with cactus, then over gentle ridges of bamboo and tree jungle, had brought them to where the village of Thonzè straggled along the shelving bank of one of the tributaries of the Chindwin up to the eminence tipped with the whitewashed brickwork of the pagoda. The rest-house, where the party was lodged, commanded a full view of the slope, of the grey line of masonry steps winding up the brown hillside, and of the pyramidical pile on the summit standing out in snowy relief against the misty blue billows of the mountainchain behind. Waring had but to raise his eyes from the table before him to behold the subject of his treatise embodied in the shimmering middle distance, while that white vision on the hill-top was in itself an inspiration; and his pen had been scratching uninterruptedly over the foolscap for over twenty minutes when Ethel's reproachful voice roused him to himself.

They were sitting in the shade underneath the rest-house,-one of the ordinary inartistic type, lifted heavenward on high teak-wood piles, with a verandah in front, two bedrooms behind, a shingled roof above, and room for half a dozen ponies, if need be, below. They had breakfasted in the front verandah, and after the meal Ethel, Waring, and Heriot had descended to the cool lower regions, where they sat, surrounded by saddles, gram-bags, and implements of sport, Waring at a rough wooden table brought for him from the police-station, Ethel and Heriot in easy chairs within talking distance, the latter smoking indolently, the former reading, or pretending to read, a Burmese grammar. Outside the village lay basking silently in the hot sunlight; not a living being was stirring in the long rambling street save a few dusty

consequential fowls and a dissolute yellow pariah-dog, which, in the intervals of scratching itself, showed its resentment at the foreign invasion which had driven it from its usual resting-place by hurling a fitful yelping bark in the direction of the rest-house. Just within the limits of the shade of the roof plodded, with fixed bayonet and downcast mien, a Burman policeman, for the moment much exercised in his mind at the hostile attitude of the pariah, but uncertain whether or not to quit his post and drive it away. He was one of the Deputy-Commissioner's guard, told off for duty at the rest-house from the stockaded police-station just visible among the tamarind-trees to the right. The drowsy buzz of voices filtered sleepily down from the verandah above, where Smart was sitting in state investigating the claims of the rival headmen. The two factions had, an hour or so before, shuffled apologetically up the

verandah-steps in single file, arrayed in their most dazzling silks, and were now squatting on the boards at opposite ends of the verandah, their eyes riveted on the Deputy - Commissioner, who, his fourth cheroot between his lips, was stabbing with a penknife a rough genealogical table which lay on the blotting - pad before him, while he listened wearily to the list of enormities with which the junior of the claimants, the late headman's eldest brother's son, had to charge the elder competitor, the deceased's youngest brother but one.

'What are you so busy over, Mr. Waring? You haven't spoken a word for the last half-hour. You seem to have forgotten all about us lazy people here.'

Waring awoke suddenly to his surroundings and looked up with a smile. He was just then in a healthily hopeful mood. So far everything had progressed as favourably as he could have

wished. Heriot had that morning been unwontedly genial and magnanimous, and had showed an amazing willingness to let his companion have his full share of Ethel's society. He had ridden for some distance that forenoon with Smart, and had allowed the Treasury-Officer and the Deputy-Commissioner's sister to enjoy a long conversation in the rear of the cavalcade, which to Waring's mind had done much towards clearing the ground. They had spoken about Waring's leave, and the terms in which the girl had referred to his departure had raised in his breast a faint hope that, after all, Heriot might not be the only stranger in the Station whose doings were of moment to her. Since breakfast, too, Heriot had been much preoccupied, and had more than once led Ethel to exclaim against his dulness; and in all this Waring imagined that he detected a desire on the part of his inscrutable friend to

withdraw gracefully from the field and give him a free hand. With anything of a lead now from Ethel he felt he would be able to say all he wanted to say.

'It's a report on the pagoda for your brother,' he replied in answer to Ethel's question.

'On this pagoda! Dear me, what does Jack want with a report, I wonder. Do let me see what you've written. Will it be printed? I hope you've said something about the sodawater bottle on the top and the dear old priest that showed us round,' and she held out her hand for the manuscript.

'It's only a stupid official thing,' muttered Waring deprecatingly. 'No, it won't be printed, I'm thankful to say.' He placed the paper in her hand and sat chewing the end of his pen, wondering inwardly, fond youth, whether Ethel was enough of a judge to appreciate the indubitable excellence of the last three paragraphs. But the girl only looked at the top sheet.

'Why are you thankful that it won't be printed?' she asked, looking up. 'I'm sure it looks very interesting, though I haven't the remotest idea what several of the words mean. What are hti and pyothet, for instance?'

'Pyat-that, not pyothet,' corrected Waring. 'I'm afraid my writing is not very clear. Hti is the golden umbrella-business on the very top of the pagoda, the thing they'd stuck the soda-water bottle on the top of, do you remember? Pyat-that is a kind of gabled erection with a lot of stories. There was a pyat-that at the foot of the hill; look, you can see its top twinkling from here.'

'Oh yes, and didn't the old priest say it was part of a covered way which once went a good distance up the slope? How I wish I could understand Burmese!'

- 'Yes, I've mentioned that in the report.'
- 'Have you? Ah yes, so you have, farther down. Oh, I see you've written quite a lot of pages, six, seven, eight, why, nine altogether! I thought it was only one. It looks a very nice report; I'm sure it ought to be printed,' and she handed the manuscript, with all its beauties undetected, back to Waring. 'But what does Jack want with a report on the pagoda?' she went on.
  - 'He wants to send it to Rangoon.'
- 'Fancy their wanting it there!' exclaimed the girl. 'But why does Jack make you do it, Mr. Waring, instead of doing it himself?'
- 'He's got enough work to do already.'
- 'Then why doesn't he do it, instead of sitting up there talking to those

natives? He and those men seem to have done nothing but chatter since breakfast-time.'

'Hush, hush, Miss Smart!' said Heriot; 'you really must not speak of the affairs of the nation so lightly. The fate of the District, I may say of the Province, trembles at this moment in the balance; all depends upon what verdict your brother gives upstairs.'

'He's got to appoint a new headman,' said Waring. 'There are two claimants, you see, and your brother has to settle which of the two is to be appointed.'

'Poor Jack, however is he to know, I wonder! I shouldn't like to have to settle. I should be afraid that the man I didn't choose would try to revenge himself on me. Can he appoint whom he likes?'

'Yes, practically.'

'Fancy! I wish he'd appoint that nice policeman who came with us this

morning from Tatkin, the one that scratched himself picking me those flowers. I wonder whom he will appoint.'

'The one with the best claims, I should think,' opined Waring.

'Not a bit of it; the one with the most cheek,' asserted Heriot. 'I'll put all my money on the brazen-faced young ruffian in a pink pahso, who led the way up. It's always the same; your diffident, retiring chap never has a chance against a fellow with lots of assurance, however good a case he may have.'

'You think so?' said Waring grimly.

'I'm sure of it; I've tried.'

'In what capacity?' The Forest-Officer's complacency was rapidly irritating Waring.

'Oh, as the diffident, modest individual, of course. What should you have thought?'

'What's going to be done to-morrow morning?' interposed Ethel. There was something in the voices of the speakers that made her scent possible discord in the air, and with feminine quickness she tried to divert the stream of conversation into a less troublous channel.

'I'm going to ride out to the plantation,' replied Heriot; 'I've arranged to meet the ranger there. Will you come with me, Miss Smart?'

- 'Is it far? I don't want to tire myself to-morrow.'
- 'About five miles out; we can be back by eleven.'
- 'I'm afraid that's too far; we shall be riding home after dinner, you know. What are you going to do to-morrow, Mr. Waring?'
- 'I promised your brother to go out with him to shoot over the *jheels* <sup>1</sup> behind the village. If Mr. Mullin-

<sup>1</sup> Marshy grounds.

xI TREASURY-OFFICER'S WOOING 205 tosh is to be believed, they are full of snipe.'

'I wonder whether I might go with you,' exclaimed Ethel. 'I've never seen any snipe-shooting.'

'I shouldn't,' remarked Heriot.
'They won't want you, the unsociable brutes, and you'll get yourself in an awful mess. Much better come with me and look at the plantation. Say you will, and I'll make it ten o'clock.' For the first time to Waring's knowledge his friend seemed to be really going out of his way to secure Ethel's company.

'I don't see why you shouldn't come with us, Miss Smart,' said Waring, who observed with satisfaction that Heriot's eagerness was producing exactly the opposite effect on the girl to what the latter had expected. 'It's beautifully clean shooting. No wading over those dirty paddy-fields, you know. All little narrow *jheels*; one could do

it in silk socks and dancing-pumps. You can walk back, too, whenever you feel tired.'

'I should like to of all things,' said Ethel resolutely; 'it'll be a new experience. I'll ask Jack.'

The movement in the verandah above told them that Jack was at that moment engaged in dismissing the villagers, who presently poured, a motley stream, down the wooden stairs, gathered up their sandals, and tailed sheepishly away in two bands to the village, each claimant at the head of his party, followed at a respectful distance by his adherents, body-servants, betel-box carriers, and what not, for they kept great state in Thonzè.

Smart followed a little later down the steps, yawning prodigiously.

'Well!' asked Waring, when the Deputy-Commissioner stood by them, 'who is it to be, Maung Waik or Maung Myo?'

- 'Maung Myo.'
- 'Is he the young one or the old one?' enquired Heriot, while Ethel murmured, 'What appalling names!'
- 'Young 'un,' replied Smart, seating himself on a gram-bag and yawning again. 'I say, isn't it about tea-time? What's the hour?'
- 'Only a little past three; do you want your tea now?' asked Ethel.
- 'May as well have it now,' said her brother. 'Then we can get out immediately it's cool enough, say at four. I'm going round to inspect the police-station after tea, and have a look at the *jheels* we're going to shoot over to-morrow.'
  - 'I told you so,' said Heriot.
  - 'Told me what?' asked Smart.
- 'Not you, your sister. I said you'd choose the young one.'
- 'Maung Myo, you mean? I couldn't do otherwise. The old one is a confirmed opium-eater, and from

what I've just heard must be hand and glove with all the *dacoits* in the neighbourhood. He's always been suspected of harbouring Bo Chet, and I'm pretty sure now that our suspicions have been well founded. One gets all kinds of useful information on enquiries like this when there's a little bad blood on both sides.'

'What, do you mean that poor old thing that went off just now at the head of one of the processions?' exclaimed Ethel. 'That gentle, frail old man, I'm sure he can't have anything to do with *dacoits*. He wouldn't hurt a fly, I'm positive.'

'Frail be blowed!' ejaculated her brother. 'He's not fifty yet; it's the opium that makes him look so old. I've no doubt he's a thorough-paced old blackguard—I say, some one yell for tea.'

'Jack, dear,' said Ethel, when the tea had been brought and she was pouring it out into the thick camp tea-cups, 'I am going out with you and Mr. Waring to-morrow morning. I may, mayn't I? I want to see how you shoot snipe. Now, don't say no; I shan't be a bother, and I shan't get myself in a mess. Mr. Waring says it will be quite clean walking.'

'Humph,' said Smart. 'I don't know about the clean walking, but if Mr. Waring doesn't mind, I don't. Only you must go back before the sun gets too hot, and mind you don't get in anybody's way.'

'No, I'll take care,' replied Ethel.
'I'm sorry that you should have to ride out by yourself to-morrow morning, Mr. Heriot, but it's really rather too far for me. I hope you won't be lonely.'

'I shall bear up,' smiled Heriot; 'don't think of me. After all, I have got the ranger to comfort me; a most

worthy officer, I assure you, quite an authority on *cutch*-reserves.' 1

He spoke with his usual imperturbability, but it struck Waring somehow that he was really rather annoyed at the prospect of a solitary ride.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Cutch, a brown dye made from the heart-wood of an acacia (Acacia catechu, whence cutch).

## CHAPTER XII

'Confound this mist, I wish it would clear away!' grumbled Smart. 'We can do nothing until it is a bit brighter.'

The Deputy-Commissioner, his sister, and Waring were threading their way through the high elephant-grass to the snipe-grounds which lay about half a mile from the village. The path along which they walked was narrow, so narrow that progress had to be made in single file, Smart in front, immediately behind the villager who was showing the way, Ethel in the centre, and Waring just ahead of the two Burman peons who brought up the rear laden with snipe-sticks and spare cartridges. All round them the earth

was shrouded in vapour, so opaque that Waring was quite unable to see the wiry active frame of the old Burman who was guiding them through the grass; he had indeed no particular wish to see it, being quite content to feast his eyes on the view he had of Miss Smart's back and of a wealth of auburn hair tucked under that young lady's white sun-hat.

'Yes, it's a nuisance,' he said. 'The birds will be as shy as shy this morning, I expect.'

'Are they very much more difficult to shoot when they are shy?' asked Ethel over her shoulder.

'Oh, of course, a great deal; they get up much farther off. They always are more shy early than when the sun is high. You will have gone home, I expect, Miss Smart, long before they have begun to lie close to-day.'

'But you'll have had some sport before then, I suppose.'

'Oh, dear me, yes, I hope so. We shall begin on the snipe immediately it is clear. Meanwhile, we may possibly be able to get a duck or two; they are easier to see than snipe.'

There was silence for a space, during which the party plodded on through the morning stillness. The thud of boots on the baked clay of the path sounded faintly through the monotonous drip of the dew from the grass and leaves on each hand. Presently the guide halted, —Waring had just begun catching glimpses of him over Smart's shoulder, —and indicated by a gesture that they had arrived at their destination. Smart held up his hand as a signal for those behind.

The path opened out in front; the high grass came to an end, and before them they could distinguish the white shimmer of water beyond an expanse of hard mud. Through the morning air came the distant splash and the subdued conversational cackle of water-fowl in their element; but the mist was still too thick to allow of their making anything out on the surface of the *jheel*.

'Stop here, Waring, and do this one, will you?' said Smart in a low voice. 'I will go on to the next *jheel* and shoot up it. We shall meet again at the farther end in time, and can settle then how to manage the other *jheels*. You'd better stop with Waring, Ethel. Come along, Shwe Chit,' and he was gone, leaving Ethel, Waring, and one of the *peons* standing on the dried mud at the edge of the white water.

For a minute or two they stood silent, gazing into the mist around them; then Waring exclaimed in a loud whisper, 'By Jove, it's lifting fast! I can make out some teal on the water out there. Let's come up a little closer.'

The two proceeded warily along the water's edge, while the morning vapours rose around them, and the sun, taking advantage of the blue glimpses above, made a determined effort to struggle through. On a sudden a shot from Smart rang out at a little distance, and with a mighty scrambling flutter the denizens of the *jheel* rose out of the water into the air, and circled round and round far overhead, the hurried flap of their wings approaching and retreating through the mist.

'What a pity,' exclaimed Ethel, 'they are all gone! No, wait, I can still see some birds flying low down over the water. What are they? They look like snipe; can they be?'

'No, they're only snippets,' Waring made answer; 'no good at all. The snipe are there all right, but they're sitting tight. Wait a bit, we shall have a duck or two settling here in a moment. Hark to those whistlers, what a noise they're making—ah, here you are!'

As he spoke the flapping of nearer pinions sounded above the confused tumult which reverberated over their heads, and a couple of ducks wheeled swiftly into sight and swept across the line of vision, dark against the dim white vapour behind them. Waring's gun rose like a living thing to his shoulder; a sudden angry spurt of smoke leaped from the barrel into the willing embrace of the mist; a loud report cleft the morning air, and before Ethel had fully realised what had happened, a dark object slanted rapidly across the sky and hurtled into the high grass some twenty yards to the left.

'Not clear enough yet for a second barrel,' muttered Waring, jerking open the breech of his gun. 'Go fetch, Ko Myaing,' he added in Burmese; 'this side of the tree, over there.'

The peon vanished into the grass and reappeared after a short interval with a fine duck dangling loosely in his hand.

'A bronze-head, by Jove!' exclaimed Waring. 'Not a bad beginning by any means.'

'What a great fat lump!' cried Ethel. 'How odd it is that that big clumsy thing can fly at such a rate through the air. It's very like an ordinary duck, isn't it? It's handsomer though, much handsomer.'

'And better eating,' said Waring the matter-of-fact; 'that's even more important. Well, Miss Smart,' he added after a space of a minute or two, during which he stood motionless, watching each quarter of the heaven intently, 'nothing else seems to be coming our way just at present. If you're quite ready we'll push on down the *jheel* and meet your brother at the farther end. It's quite light enough to see snipe now,' and swinging his gun into the hollow of his arm he skirted along the edge of the water, striding slowly through the short reeds which

fringed its margin, while Ethel followed at a little distance on the drier ground that lay nearer the high grass. The mist was fast drifting away, and the line of jungle on the opposite bank, a stone's throw off, was now clearly visible.

The first fifty yards or so were covered in silence, which Ethel at last broke by observing: 'How very like snipe those birds are that are flying about, snippets, I think you called them. I saw one quite close just now; it had a long bill just like a snipe.'

'Yes, it's hard to tell one from the other at first,' replied Waring, his face still fixed stedfastly ahead; 'but there's no mistaking the genuine article when once one has seen it. Do you mind, though, not talking just now, Miss Smart? Our voices might disturb—ah!'

There was a squawk and a whirr, and a brown object whizzed up from

the sedge and zigzagged away across the water. Waring's gun rang out twice, and the second shot drove a ragged bundle of feathers into the reeds ahead of them.

'Was that a snipe, Mr. Waring?'

'Yes, got him the second barrel,—one moment, please; we'll reload before we move on to pick that beggar up. We may put up half a dozen birds between here and where he lies. Ah, I thought so, there goes a second, and a third. They're sitting tighter than I thought they would. Hark! there goes your brother again; I wonder what sport he's having. Now I'm ready, if you are. Ko Myaing, keep your eye on that bird.'

'Poor thing!' cried Ethel, as they came up to the snipe which had just been brought down. 'I can see its beak sticking up into the air so pitifully. Why, I don't think it's dead!' she exclaimed, as Waring

stooped to pick up the little crumpled mass.

'No, not quite, but I've put it out of its misery by this time,' said Waring. 'Catch, Ko Myaing. The beauty of snipe, Miss Smart, is that they're like mosquitoes, tricky, but once touch them and down they come. They don't fly away with a charge of shot in them, like duck. Nice gentlemanly little chaps they are.'

'Poor little dears!' mourned Ethel.
'It does seem a shame to shoot them; they are so pretty. I don't mind seeing those great fat waddling ducks brought down, but I must say I'm sorry for these sweet little things. But there, I won't talk. Let's go on, and do try and kill the next one outright.'

The next one was killed outright, fifteen seconds later; and so was the next, which was not secured until Waring had emptied three barrels in vain, and a minute or two after this

last had been picked up the couple met the Deputy-Commissioner at the farther end of the *jheel*.

- 'What luck?' enquired Smart, taking off a huge sun-hat to wipe the perspiration from a heated brow.
- 'One duck and a brace and a half of snipe, so far,' returned Waring. 'What have you done?'
- 'Two teal and a snipe. The birds are very wary this morning. I've only had one chance at a snipe up till now. By the way, Ethel, I think it's time you were trotting home. You've seen what you wanted to see by this time, I expect. We've got rather a muddy bit to go through to get to the other *jheels*; I don't think you can manage it.'
- 'Very well,' replied the obedient sister. 'I suppose the funny old man who brought us here will show me the way back to the village. I could almost find the way myself, but I

suppose I had better have the old thing.'

'Yes, take him; he's waiting at the end of the path for us. You can make him understand you want to be shown the way back, can't you? Say pyan thwa; that will show him what you're up to. Then, when you've got to the rest-house, you can let him go. Say thwa then, without the pyan, and he'll understand. Give him an empty sodawater bottle if Ramaswamy has got one. Waring and I will find our way back somehow. See?'

'I do; thwa,—pyan thwa, I'll remember. Good-bye, then, for the present. Don't shoot more snipe than is actually necessary, Mr. Waring; I know it's no use asking Jack to hold his hand. Poor little things, I wish you would be satisfied with ducks and not kill the snipe. It's a pity they are so nice on toast. Good-bye,—thwa,—pyan thwa.' And she turned

and picked her way daintily back to the farther end of the *jheel*.

It was an hour and a half later that Waring, after a vast deal of striding and wading, found himself back again at the point where the path from the village debouched upon the snipeground, and rested for a while where Ethel had quitted him, warm and weary, to count his spoil. Nine brace of snipe and a brace of duck,-the second of the latter secured with a charge of number nine loosed at a venture-was a fairly good bag for a moderate shot like himself; in fact, as he looked at the birds and remembered Ethel's parting injunction, he feared it might seem far too good a bag to her. However that might be, he decided to leave off; he had slaughtered enough for that day, at any rate quite as many snipe as were actually necessary. Smart's gun was barking incessantly more than half a

mile away; it would be long, he knew, before the enthusiast could be prevailed on to retrace his steps, and it was certainly not worth while waiting for him. Altogether it was small wonder that, before he was aware of it, his mind had roved away from the muddy grass-encircled jheel, already blazing under the hot blue sky, to the cool shade of the rest-house, where some one sat who was reckoning on his not butchering to excess that day, and might deign to commend his moderation when she had seen the slain. As he looked again at the pendent bodies he felt almost sure that Ethel would think their number too great, and before he made a move from the jheel, he did what he had never done before, and was half ashamed of doing now - that was to arrange his spoil on the snipe-stick so as to make the total appear smaller than it really was; he had not the heart to

throw any away. Then he arose, and, following an irresistible impulse, turned down the path which led to the village. He hoped to find Ethel alone in the rest-house, and to have half an hour or so with her before Heriot returned from the plantation. What could he not do in half an hour?

There was a muffled click in the high elephant-grass to his right, as he reached a point where the path forked, to meet again on the farther side of a buffalo-wallow full of rich, grey slime. But on the eve of a meeting with the young woman of his choice the average young man is inclined to be introspective, and not over-susceptible to external sights and sounds unconnected with his tryst, and our friend was no exception to the rule, so the click, for all it had a nasty metallic ring in it, went unheeded. If Waring heard it, he put it down to the snapping of a twig caused by the passage of some

bird through the grass, and gave it no second thought. His peon had lagged behind to light a cheroot, and arrived at that particular spot too late to hear the sound, otherwise his suspicions might have been aroused; but as it was, he scurried past, the snipe bobbing at his side, to catch the Assistant-Commissioner up, and was aware of nothing. The patter of his bare feet had, however, scarcely died away in the hot air before two men pressed with cautious tread through the grass and stood, side by side, near the edge of the buffalo-wallow, glaring nervously, now up and down the path, now into each other's eyes. One was the dacoit, Shwe Myaing, loose-limbed and slovenly, the other a shorter man, broadshouldered and bull-necked, with the white seam of an old sword-cut across his forehead.

'Are you mad, Shwe Myaing?' whispered the latter, turning on his

companion when it was clear that their presence had not been detected, with a scowl that broke up the scar on his brow into separate white ripples. 'Do you want us both to be killed that you try to fire in broad daylight? Suppose you had missed the *thakin*.' 1

'I should not have missed the thakin,' returned Shwe Myaing; 'I could not have missed him. How was I to know that the cap had gone bad and that the powder would not catch?' The dacoit's big mouth was wreathed with its habitual shame-faced grin, but on his face the beads of cold perspiration told that his courage had needed a good deal of screwing to reach the sticking-point. His breath came and went in short, quick pants. It was a bitter disappointment. He had come with his leader to Thonzè early that morning, before he had properly rested from his exertions of the previous day, hoping against hope that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Lord or master; equivalent to Sahib.

a lucky shot at the Deputy-Commissioner or some other official would enable him to put an end for evermore to his comrades' gibes. A couple of minutes earlier it had seemed as though his chance had really come. The Assistant-Commissioner, whom he had good reason to know of old, had strolled, all unheeding, past the spot where he and Bo Chet lurked, waiting for the dusk; the pressure of a finger ought to have done all that was required. Heedless of Bo Chet's admonishing gesture, he had pulled the trigger only to find himself covered with shame and obloquy. His old musket had missed fire; his price was still a paltry hundred rupees.

'And even if you had hit him,' snapped the dacoit-leader, 'what good would that have done? The police would have been on us in a moment. There would have been no getting away into the forest. Fool! I should not have let you come if I had thought

you were going to risk our lives like this. You let the woman pass a while back; why should you want to fire at this one?'

'A woman! what good is there in killing a woman?' muttered Shwe Myaing. Then, suddenly remembering that his behaviour at Thayetbin had been hardly consistent with this lofty sentiment, he went on in an explanatory undertone. 'That was the wundauk,' saya-gyi, who imprisoned me for three months last year.'

'That makes no difference,' was the rejoinder. 'If you don't take care you will spoil everything. You are only fit to do coolies' work and fetch in rice.'

'None of the others dared go into Minywa yesterday,' retorted Shwe Myaing, extracting a fresh cap with trembling fingers from a knot at the corner of his waist-cloth and fitting it

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Magistrate.

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with deliberation on to the nipple of his musket.

This was an undoubted fact, and the dacoit-leader was unable to contradict it. That did not, however, hinder him from saying again in a sulky undertone: 'Fool! you are only fit for coolies' work.'

'Besides,' Shwe Myaing went on, 'even if the gun had gone off, the police would have thought it was one of the officers firing at ducks and done nothing.'

'How about the *peon* then?' said Bo Chet. 'Do you think he would have done nothing?'

'I should have shot him too,' said Shwe Myaing, with as much assurance as though his weapon had been a double-barrelled breech-loading rifle, and not a decrepit Brown Bess that never would come up to the scratch.

Bo Chet gave a short, sharp, incredulous laugh. 'Well, let there be

no more firing now,' he said, 'not even if we see the Deputy-Commissioner coming up the path. Remember we have come to Thonzè to get drugs, not to shoot Government officers.'

Shwe Myaing made no answer, though he took the liberty of discrediting his leader's last statement. If drugs had been the sole object of Bo Chet's visit to Thonzè, that astute individual would surely have selected some day for his expedition when the Deputy-Commissioner and his party were not in the village. Of that the dacoit was certain, but at the moment he was not in the mood for argument, and his grunt, as he followed the great man into the remoter depths of the elephant-grass, meant that, so far as he was concerned, the discussion was closed.

But of all that was going on behind his back Waring knew nothing. By the time the two dacoits had resettled themselves comfortably in their ambush

he had reached the village and was opposite the rest-house. There was the shimmer of a white dress in the verandah, and a fair face looked down upon him as he halted for a moment at the bottom of the steps. Heriot's pony was not in the stable out by the servants' quarters. Heriot had evidently not yet returned from his plantation, and Waring perceived that he and Ethel were likely to have some little time together undisturbed. The opportunity seemed to be the very one he wanted for saying something that he had long wished to say, something very important that he had very nearly said the evening before as he walked alone with Ethel in the moonlight.

## CHAPTER XIII

ETHEL had resumed her seat by the time Waring arrived at the top of the steps, and was fanning herself energetically with a palm-leaf fan at her brother's table.

- 'So you have come back alone,' she exclaimed. 'Are you tired?'
  - 'No, not a bit.'
- 'You ought to be, I'm sure. You look as though you had been wading in mud up to your waist. I'm so glad I didn't go any farther with you; I should have been drowned.'
- 'Yes, we had one or two dirty bits to cross, but of course you could have gone round them. We got some very good places.'

'Won't you sit down?' she said.

'I will when I'm fit to,' he made reply; 'but I must get some of this stuff off.' He had been scraping his boots against the side of one of the posts of the stair-rail. She watched him in silence while the flakes of dried mud fell on to the boards, and sat immersed in her own thoughts, hardly, so it seemed, aware of his presence till the boots were partially cleaned and, with a final stamp of both feet, he said, 'Some of the best I've seen this year,' when she appeared to collect herself and murmured: 'Ah, so you got some good places, did you? How many birds did you shoot?'

'Nine brace of snipe, one of duck. I don't know what your brother's bag is. I came home without him; he's still hard at it.'

His eye, as he spoke, stole round guiltily towards the game, the greater part of which his *peon* had brought up and placed conspicuously in a corner of the verandah, but he need have had no alarm lest Ethel should take exception to the number of the slain, for she had clearly forgotten the piteous appeal she had made on behalf of the snipe earlier that morning. Her preoccupation was a little disconcerting, for the very important something had still to be said, and gave no promise of falling readily into words: and now that the time had come, he began to feel that without some little encouragement from her he might be forced to let this exceptional chance slip through his fingers. However, he sat down when he had finished scraping his boots and waited, patiently enough, for her to break the silence, offering up an inward prayer that she would give him some kind of help.

'Jack will be here in time for breakfast, you may be sure,' said Ethel. 'By the bye,' she continued, 'Mr. Heriot has not come back yet.'

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- 'Apparently not.'
- 'He has been a long time, hasn't he?'
- 'Not very; I don't think he expected to be back till eleven.'
  - 'Didn't he say ten?'
- 'If you were going with him he was going to make it ten, I believe; not otherwise.'
- 'Oh, I thought he was coming back at ten in any case,' and she wielded her fan assiduously, while her eyes wandered away to that point on the village road where a rider coming from the plantation would first be visible.

There was another pause, during which Waring, watching the direction of her glance with a vague sense of irritation, came to the conclusion that his time had perhaps not come yet, and that, if Ethel was going to brood over Heriot's absence, he himself would be a good deal more profitably employed in changing his wet things than in sitting,

speechless and impotent, in a draughty verandah; but as, suiting his action to his thought, he was stretching his stiff limbs to rise, Ethel transfixed him with, —'Mr. Waring, you know the girl Mr. Heriot used to be engaged to, don't you.'

Used to be! This was a bolt from the blue with a vengeance! In a moment Waring saw the worst of those awkward fears that he had been thrusting sedulously into the background realised in a manner all too ominous. The question left him for a moment bereft of the power of speech, but regaining command over himself, he said: 'You mean Miss Dudley Devant.'

- 'Dudley Devant, yes, that was the name. Then it is true?'
  - 'What?'
- 'That he has been engaged,—you know the girl?'
- 'Yes,—I mean no,—no, I don't know her myself, but my sister does,

I believe, slightly. I thought he was still engaged; are you sure he is not?'

'Sure?' echoed Ethel, with a help-less little laugh. 'How should I know? I know nothing but what Mr. Heriot told me yesterday. He mentioned, quite casually, that he had been engaged to this girl, and that the engagement had been broken off. It's of no consequence to any one, of course, but——'

'Broken off, is it? Really! When? Did he say when?'

'No; I was rather curious to know, but he did not say. It seems somehow so odd to think of Mr. Heriot engaged to anybody. I thought that as you knew the girl (he said you knew her and all about it) you might be able to enlighten me. I suppose it has been really broken off, though I'm never quite sure when Mr. Heriot is joking and when he is not. He cannot have

been serious when he said you knew all about it, can he?'

- 'I know nothing about the breaking off. I only knew, or rather believed, that he was engaged.'
- 'And that the engagement was still,
  —had not been broken off?'
  - 'Exactly.'
- 'Ah, I begin to see. So you did know that then; have you known it long?'
- 'Yes, some time, more than a month now.'
- 'How funny! I should never have guessed. I wonder you didn't mention it to me.'
- 'Well, it was no business of mine, you know.'
- 'No more it was of mine, either, I suppose,' laughed the girl, a trifle abashed; 'but of course one likes to know things like these about one's friends, and after all, an engagement is not an everyday occurrence. I wonder

now whether he is really still engaged? Does anybody else in the Station know?'

'Not that I know of. I certainly haven't mentioned it to anybody; no more, I think, has Mr. Heriot.'

'Well, there's no doubt you can keep a secret, Mr. Waring. You would have told me if you had been a girl, now wouldn't you?'

It was Waring's turn to smile. Ethel seemed to be facing the possibility of Heriot's being still engaged with such calmness that he began by degrees to recover his own equanimity, and to wonder, guileless simpleton, whether the state of the Forest-Officer's affections was as immaterial to his companion as she was striving to make it out to be. 'You should know that best,' he made reply. 'Besides, how was I to tell that you didn't know yourself?'

'Who could have told me, pray?'

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- 'Mr. Heriot.'
- 'Why should he have told me?'
- 'Didn't he tell you himself yesterday?'

'He did, that's true; but I think he was a little surprised that you had not told me. It would have come more naturally from you. Don't laugh, Mr. Waring; if you were a girl you would understand.' And then she added, half to herself, 'I'm sure I don't know what reason he could have had for being so confidential. I cannot think why it should be specially interesting to me of all people to know that he is, or, at any rate, has been, engaged?'

Ethel's last words made her hearer's heart pulsate with a new hope, and sent a sudden determination flashing through his brain. A sane man would, after what had gone before, have deferred saying what he wanted to say to a more favourable opportunity, but for the moment Waring had succumbed to

the most imbecile of impulses. ignored the inconsistency manifest in the girl's last words; he did not notice the slight suspicion of pique that underlay them; he was blind to the troubled look that a keen observer would have noticed stealing across her face. could only think how sweet that face looked as it stood out from the dark background of teak wall behind, and resolve with idiotic perversity that now, if ever, the hour for speaking out his mind had come. Now that it was evident that Heriot was free the necessity for prompt action was all the more Time and place, it seemed urgent. to him, were both auspicious, and in Heriot's engagement a subject had been touched upon which bordered closely on the one he was waiting for an occasion to raise. The transition from one to the other would, he knew, be easy enough for any one with a little tact, and as he sat and rubbed aimlessly at

the dry mud with which his stockings were coated, he cursed himself for the ineptitude that hindered him from making this golden opportunity his own. But mental self-castigation, though of the fiercest, has never yet of itself produced either a happy flow of ideas or a felicitous capacity of expression. Nothing came to him, as he rubbed, in the way of an inspiration, and in the end he was driven to making by a sadly circuitous route for the point he desired to reach.

'It is very jolly here, isn't it?' he began, after several false starts and much preliminary clearing of the throat.

'Very,' she made answer.

'I've liked this little trip very much indeed,' he continued, casting about desperately for an idea that would draw the thread of talk in the right direction. 'I think it has been most successful.'

'I am glad; I hoped that you would,' said Ethel impassively, gazing straight in front of her. Nothing could have shown more plainly that she was paying but little heed to what her companion said than her failure to find anything remarkable in the abrupt change in the conversation.

He plunged blindly on, speaking as though in a dream and barely listening to her replies. 'I've enjoyed the last two days more than any I've spent since I came down from Minmyo, and I must say I have had a first-rate time at Tatkin.'

She looked at him for a moment and then away again, while he went on, feeling that each fresh remark of his was more insane than the one that had preceded it. 'You may not believe it, Miss Smart, but I shall be really almost sorry to go on leave next month.'

He stopped, with a glance at Ethel,

and a faint hope that he might be spurred to speech by some echo of the sentiments she had graciously vouch-safed the day before when the subject of his departure had been discussed; but there was no look or word of encouragement from his companion to help him now. Ethel barely moved her eyes away from the distant prospect, and murmured mechanically: 'Yes, we shall all miss you, I'm sure.' Obviously there was no chance of her coming to his assistance.

'I should not mind so much,' he pursued doggedly, 'if I could be sure of being sent back to Tatkin when my leave is up, but I don't suppose I shall have any such luck. I expect I shall go back to Lower Burmah. It's enough to make one feel inclined to chuck one's leave.'

'Well, I suppose you can cancel it, can't you?' she said, turning her head towards him.

He sat silent for a space. 'Yes, I can, of course,' he answered at last; 'and what's more, I would, if I could only——'

But here she interrupted him hurriedly: 'Oh, but it would be a great pity to do that.' There was a dawn of prescience on her face by this time. The listless look had vanished from it as though by magic; in a moment she had become keen-eyed and alert.

- 'I shouldn't mind a bit,' he repeated, 'if I could be sure of getting back to Tatkin and of——'
- 'Of what?' she asked after a pause, reluctantly, as though she only spoke because he was waiting for her to do so.
- 'Of seeing you again.' The words came out with an effort.
- 'Oh, don't say that, Mr. Waring,' exclaimed Ethel, now thoroughly roused to herself and inspired with a sudden hope of being able to combat senti-

ment with flippancy. 'Don't say that! The world is small, and Burmah, whatever the Burmans may say to the contrary, is even smaller. We shall be cleverer than most people if we can avoid running up against each other in the future.'

- 'In the future, yes, but it may not be the same then,' he persisted.
- 'Why not?' she laughed, with a renewed attempt at sprightliness that to a listener would have seemed very strained. 'We shall both be a little more decrepit perhaps, but——'
- 'It may be very different,—more than that I mean,—things may have changed utterly for both of us. I'm afraid it will never be quite,—quite——'
- 'I don't see why it shouldn't be quite the same,' she exclaimed.
- 'Ah, but you don't understand me,' he exclaimed. 'Who knows but what by that time——'

'Good morning, Miss Smart.'

Heaven only knows what tender admissions the emotion of the moment might have wrung from Waring, if these words, uttered in a sportive bellow, had not sounded behind his shoulder, almost in his ear. He turned with an angry start (for even the mildest of men resents being rudely burst in upon when he is wrought to the highest pitch of tremulous anticipation), and became aware of a crimson countenance, rising into sight like an aldermanic harvest-moon, over the topmost ridge of the verandah steps.

'Good morning, Mr. Mullintosh,' cried Ethel, with sudden and unfeigned alacrity. 'Whoever would have thought of seeing you here!'

'Ah, I thought you would be surprised,' replied the Policeman, leering genially at the couple in the verandah. 'Morning, Waring, how are you? Fact is, Miss Smart, I spent

last night at Minywa, close by, and hearing you were all here, I thought I'd run over and see how you were getting along.'

- 'Well, we're very glad to see you,' said Ethel. 'Come and sit down, do. You'll stop to breakfast, I hope.'
- 'Whatever took you to Minywa?' asked Waring, not, it must be confessed, very graciously.
  - 'Guess,' said Mullintosh.
  - 'Not Bo Chet again?'
- 'The very same, my son. A man came in yesterday, soon after you'd left, to say that one of our friend's gang had been seen that morning in Minywa making himself jolly comfortable in one of the monastery zayats, if you please, so I nipped over yesterday evening with half a dozen mounted men.'
- 'Any luck?' asked Waring. He was doing his best to suppress his indignation at the unceremonious in-

terruption of a conversation which had promised to be so interesting, but he found the task a difficult one.

'Luck? No fear!' replied Mullintosh, seating himself astride of a chair and resting his elbows on its back. 'Not a sign of the beggar anywhere, and nothing to be got out of the pongyi1 or the villagers. Made one of them as an example over to Maung Kyi to be interrogated out of my sight, but it was no good; no information would the sinner give, though he squealed like a good 'un every time old Blunderbuss jogged his memory. I wasn't supposed to be within earshot, of course, but I heard a good deal. I expect the informer must have been dreaming, for the old buster in charge of the kyaung is a decent, quiet sort of chap, who will have nothing to say to had characters.'

'Are they dacoits that you're talking

<sup>1</sup> Priest or monk.

about?' asked Ethel, to whom most of what the Policeman said was Greek.

'Ay, surely, as bad as they make 'em, Miss Smart.'

'Some of the headman's people here are suspected of being in with Bo Chet,' observed Waring. 'The late chap's brother is a friend of his, Smart says.'

'By Jove,' exclaimed Mullintosh, 'I should like to put Maung Kyi on to the late chap's brother for half an hour or so to see what he could extract from him with his divining-rod! Can't though here, I suppose,' he added, with a wink at Waring. 'Twouldn't do, eh? Well, I'll see what I can do after breakfast; I must see Smart first. Been out after the wily snipe, eh? Thought I heard popping as I came along. What do you think of the *jheels*? Not so bad, are they? What have you got?'

'Twenty head of game altogether,

- —nine brace of snipe. I don't know what Smart's got.'
- 'Smart's not back yet, I suppose. Where's the great Heriot? He's with you, isn't he?'
- 'Yes, he's gone off to inspect a plantation.'
- 'All by his little self? Fancy now! Why didn't you go too, Miss Smart, to look after him?'
- 'I went out with Mr. Waring and my brother to see the snipe-shooting,' replied Ethel composedly. She did not, much to Waring's amazement, seem to resent Mullintosh's tone of easy familiarity.
- Oh, did you? Awfully sporting of you,' continued the latter. 'Will I have anything? Thanks, I shouldn't say no to a peg. I've had an uncommon thirsty ride. By Jove, you're comfortable here, Miss Smart,—all the luxuries of the season. I see I've fallen on my legs.'

'I think I'll go and change,' said Waring a few minutes later as he perceived Smart's thick-set figure in the distance swinging along towards the rest-house, and realised that there was no immediate prospect of renewing his conversation with Ethel. Mullintosh was in a chair beside the girl with a long tumbler of whisky and soda-water in his hand, holding forth at the top of his voice on the superlative qualities of the ground that had been shot over that morning, and Ethel was listening, smiling and animated, to his blatant utterances. Waring gazed at her half reproachfully as he drew the curtain of the bedroom hehind him. He could not make out what it was that was moving her to act so waywardly; her alternate fits of moodiness and mirth mystified him. Early that morning she had been as cheery and benignant as she well could be; two hours later he had found her,

on his return from the snipe-grounds, apathetic and dull, with hardly a word to say for herself. Again, when the sentimental references to his departure had marked the tenor of his thoughts, there had been renewed attention and (it seemed to him) a sudden glad light in her eye. Yet, when encouraged by her words and looks, he had begun to speak out his mind, she had been unable to disguise her relief at Mullintosh's boisterous interruption. This succession of ups and downs was something his slow-moving male mind was quite unable to keep pace with.

Puzzled as Waring was to know how to account for Miss Smart's vicissitudes of feeling, his conception of its causes was scarcely less vague than Ethel's. She felt worried and vexed, but tried hard to persuade herself that she knew not exactly why. The reason was not, however, really very difficult to discover. Although she

had so pointedly disclaimed all interest in the affairs of Heriot's heart, she could not honestly disguise from herself the fact that what he had told her the evening before about his engagement to Miss Dudley Devant had left behind it an impression that was not to be erased at a moment's notice. Up till then she had steadily avoided trying to analyse her feelings towards the impenetrable Forest-Officer, and even now would have met the suggestion that her liking for him was anything out of the common with an unqualified denial. Still, shut her eyes as she would, matters had reached a stage with her at which the new knowledge that Heriot's affections had been bestowed elsewhere had had the effect almost of a personal slight. Despite the doubts she had expressed she fully believed that he was now free; none the less she would not have been sorry to solace herself that morning with the

visible assurance that there was some one beside Heriot who really prized her friendship,—if only she could be certain that that some one would not go too far, would be reasonable. It more than anything the sudden fear that Waring might fail in moderation that made her so ready to welcome Mullintosh's interposition. It would have been horrid, she assured herself, to have to be nasty to one whom she so thoroughly liked as Waring; but even while Heriot's treatment of her rankled in her mind she felt certain that she could not give the right reply to the question she had half feared Waring was going to put to her. She would not, however, have admitted all this, even to herself. All she was certain of was that she was troubled that morning and unsettled. All things seemed to her for the moment to be tangled and awry. She wanted time to look about her, and readjust XIII TREASURY-OFFICER'S WOOING 257

her ideas, and not knowing what to expect from Waring, she clung to the big voluble Policeman as to some rough, storm-battered rock in a troublous sea.

## CHAPTER XIV

'DINNER is ready, Jack,' said Ethel.
'We must make haste over it, for the poor servants will have a lot to do washing up and packing the things before they can get away, and those carts are so slow.'

She was sitting in the verandah of the rest-house in the fast-gathering twilight, with Waring on one side and Heriot on the other. The table was laid for the evening meal; the cloth gleamed white through the dusk; they had been waiting for Smart and Mullintosh to begin. After dinner they were all going to ride home to Tatkin by the light of the moon which had just begun to send up a

golden glow behind the black treetops. The day had been spent by the three in the verandah for the most part in idleness. Waring had made a fainthearted effort to finish his report on the pagoda, but had thrown up the work in disgust before he had written ten lines of fresh matter. All settled occupation filled him with loathing. He was restless and ill at ease, always feverishly watching for an opportunity of renewing his interrupted conversation with Ethel, and always watching in vain. Heriot, his morning inspection over, made no pretence of anything approaching industry, but sat smoked through the heat of the day near Ethel, and when, in the cool of the afternoon, the latter went out, bore her and Waring company, talking but little, calmly complacent, but as careful as Waring was never to let the girl out of his sight. To an impartial spectator the vigilance of the pair, the impatient

disquietude of the one, the serene tenacity of purpose of the other, would have afforded a diverting spectacle; and the humour of the situation was not entirely lost upon Ethel as she wandered up to the pagoda with her two companions that still, sunny afternoon. But she was the only one who profited by the little exhibition; the other two men of the party were far too busy to give a thought to the comedy that was progressing under their eyes. The importance of the news which Mullintosh had brought had led Smart to detain him in Thonzè for the day, and after the two had overhauled the books in the police-station together, they subjected the villagers to a minute and searching cross-examination regarding the redoubtable Bo Chet, whose pestilent presence in the neighbourhood they had every reason to suspect. They had just returned, when Ethel spoke, from a visit to Maung Waik, the unsuccessful candidate for the headmanship, whose relations with the *dacoit*leader were unquestionably of a very doubtful character, and they were full of their recent interview as they mounted the steps of the rest-house.

'All right, Ethel,' exclaimed Smart in answer to his sister. 'You can tell them to bring dinner whenever you like; Mullintosh and I are quite ready. You noticed his face while I was speaking, didn't you, Mullintosh?'

'You bet,—shifty beast! I'll lay ten gold *mohurs* he knows as well as anything where the beggar is.'

'Who's that, Maung Waik?' asked Waring.

'Yes,'said Smart; 'I've been questioning him about Bo Chet. The brute was as sulky as a bear with a sore head, and wouldn't say a word. I'm certain that, if he hasn't actually been harbouring him, he knows where he's in hiding. Apparently his wife is some relation of

Bo Chet's; she's one of the lot that has been deported to Sagaing. I wish I'd known it earlier; I can't imagine why the myo-ôk 1 didn't tell me.'

'He'd never dare to harbour him with the police-station so close,' exclaimed Waring.

'I don't know so much about that,' said Mullintosh. 'In fact, I don't mind betting that ten minutes after we've all cleared out of the village, Bo Chet will be hobnobbing with Maung Waik in his back verandah.'

'You think so?' said Smart. 'Well, look here, tell the head-constable to pay a surprise-visit there an hour or so after the last of us have gone. Or stay, we'll organise the little surprise ourselves. I can't help thinking some of the police have an inkling of what goes on in the village. We'll start, as we intended, after dinner, and in an hour or so's

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> The native officer in charge of a district under the Assistant-Commissioner.

time, when the servants have got well away, we'll ride back and look in on Maung Waik and see at the same time whether proper guard is kept at the police-station.'

'And what's to become of poor me while you're *dacoit*-hunting?' enquired Ethel in plaintive protest.

'Oh, the deuce, I forgot you,' ejaculated Smart curtly, in a tone that brought a glow to his sister's face. 'Here, Heriot, you wouldn't mind seeing my sister home, would you, while I come back to the village with Mullintosh and Waring to reconnoitre?'

'I think you're very rude, Jack,' exclaimed Ethel emphatically. 'I'm sure I don't want to be a nuisance; I can easily ride home by myself.'

'Oh, bless you, Heriot will like it,' returned the unabashed Smart. 'Won't you, Heriot?'

'Is it necessary to ask?' replied the Forest-Officer, with a gracious inclina-

tion towards Ethel. There was a ring of such genuine satisfaction in his voice that the look of mortification almost died away from the girl's face, and she was able to acknowledge his speech with a grateful smile. The exchange of glances was not lost upon Waring, who, at the thought of the long ride which Heriot would thus be enabled to have alone in Ethel's company, silently relegated Bo Chet and all his followers and supporters, together with his own ill-bred superior officer, to the bottomless pit. His reflections would certainly not have been sweetened could he at that moment have read Heriot's thoughts, and been made aware of the resolve which the latter forthwith took to make the utmost of the magnificent opportunities that had been placed thus unexpectedly within his grasp. His rival had had his turn that morning at the snipe-grounds, and had apparently failed to further his suit. To himself it had now been given to plead his cause in the romantic moonlit watches of the night, and he had by this time really made up his mind.

'Come along, let's get to dinner,' continued Smart, as the panting servants mounted the steps laden with plates of soup. 'Sit down, you chaps, will you? Where's the lamp, Ramaswamy?'

'Yes, sir, bringing, sir,' replied Smart's Madrasi boy breathlessly; and when the five were seated and had started eating their tinned soup he descended again to the lower regions, and reappeared carrying a white-globed paraffin lamp which he placed on the table in front of his master, darting off immediately afterwards for the whisky.

'Very poor light, that,' said the host, as he gazed critically at the dim flame. 'Can you fellows see to eat at the other end of the table? I thought not; you're quite in the dark, Mullintosh. Turn

the lamp up, Ramaswamy. Where's he gone to? Below again? Bringing up the drinks, I suppose. Come, we must see the way to our mouths.'

He rose from his seat as he spoke and turned up the wick, till the flame of the lamp shone out clear and white, and illumined his broad forehead and deeply furrowed cheeks with a startling refulgence. Waring watched him with listless eyes, only half aware of how under the heightened glare the Deputy-Commissioner's clean-shaven face stood out ever more and more distinct against the dark sky-line behind. He was turning his gaze away to his plate when the sharp crack of a rifle from outside roused him rudely to a full and sudden perception of his surroundings. Simultaneously the globe of the lamp clicked angrily, and a sharp, scalding pain near his right shoulder brought him to his feet with a start. As he rose something swayed slowly forward at his side, and he turned, to see Smart lying in the bright glare, face downwards on the white tablecloth, quite still, with a ruddy stain spreading out round him. Before the startled diners had fully realised what had happened, a second rifle-shot, which pealed up through the wooden floor at their feet, told that the sentry below had been prompt to respond to the challenge from the jungle. Then followed a scurrying of bare feet, a barking of dogs, and a confused babel of voices outside, and while Ethel sprang towards Smart, Heriot and Mullintosh. leaping to their feet, clattered noisily down the verandah steps. Waring, who was still dazed with the shock of his wound, was slower in quitting the table, and as he staggered unsteadily after the other two he became aware of Ethel's face gazing up at him, piteous and white in the lamp-light. She was kneeling by her brother's side.

'Don't go too, Mr. Waring,' she

wailed, catching hold of his sleeve. 'Stop with me, stop, please! Help me to look after him,—lift up his head,—he doesn't move! Oh, poor Jack, poor Jack!'

They lifted up the sunken head from where it lay pillowed on the cloth, and Waring tried as best he could with his uninjured arm to staunch the flow of blood and to force spoonful of whisky between the white lips, but it was of no avail. The Deputy-Commissioner's body lay like a log in their arms; his jaws were firmly clenched, and the ragged puncture in the breast of his khaki jacket told a tale there was no misconstruing. There could be no hope with a bullet-hole there, and Waring felt that Ethel had realised this almost at the first glance, for when he at length desisted from his fruitless efforts she looked up with a gaze of blank despair into his face.

'Do you think there is any chance of—' she began in a hoarse whisper, and when he slowly shook his head she went on: 'I thought not. Poor old boy! Poor old boy!' A moment later she winced as though in pain, and exclaimed: 'Oh, Mr. Waring, I was so cross with him a moment ago, —before this, you know—because he was rude to me. He was rude, wasn't he? It seems so wrong of me now.'

Waring was silent. He reflected that his own last sentiments towards the dead man he now held in his arms were not of a nature calculated to soothe his conscience. Nothing was said for a short space, during which Ethel, still kneeling, stroked the still head that lay on her breast. Then she looked up and said—

'I can't believe it. Who could have done it? Who could have dared?'

'It must have been Bo Chet, or one

of his lot,' replied Waring; 'no one else would have dared. We shall know directly,' he went on, 'for it sounds as though they had got the man who fired the shot. I'll go and see, shall I?' And he attempted to rise, but in doing so he rested for a moment on his wounded arm, and the acute pain which the pressure occasioned made him drop back with a groan of anguish.

'What is the matter?' asked Ethel, and then, for the first time, observing the condition of his left arm which was saturated with blood, she cried, 'It's—it's your own then! Are you hurt too?'

'I was hit at the same time,' he replied; 'they must have used slugs. I'm afraid the bone is broken, but I'm not sure. That's better,' and he struggled laboriously to his feet. 'I must go down to see what is being done.'

'Oh, please don't leave me,' en-

treated the girl. 'Can't you wait till the others come back?'

'I'm afraid not. They may not come back for a long time; they may go straight off after the *dacoits*; they may want me. I won't be a minute, not a second longer than I can help. I'll send Ramaswamy up, if you like.'

'No, don't,' she cried after him. 'Come back yourself quick.'

The wavering flicker of a couple of hurricane-lanterns guided the Treasury-Officer across the dusk to where Mullintosh and Heriot with some Burman police and a few scared villagers stood, talking eagerly, round an object that rested motionless on the grass. It was a Burman in a dirty white jacket and scanty waist-cloth, a long-limbed, ill-favoured creature who lay gazing wide-eyed and mute at the little group that encircled him. He had been shot through the body by the sentry on guard five seconds after emptying into

the mess-house verandah the contents of the muzzle-loader now lying harmless by his side.

'It was a great piece of luck the beggar wore a white jacket, otherwise there would have been nothing to tell the sentry where he was,' Mullintosh was saying as Waring came up. 'As it was, it was a bit of a fluke bringing him down in the dark like this. Who is the sentry, Maung Kyi? He's not a Thonzè man, is he? I seem to have seen him lately in Tatkin.'

'He is a Thonzè man, sir,' replied the sergeant, 'but he has been at headquarters for training. His name is Shwe Zin, a third-class constable.'

'I thought I knew his face. A Thonzè man, is he, and third-class? Well, my lad, you're in luck; if you're not a first-class constable before the month is out it won't be my fault.'

'Do they know who it is?' asked Waring, joining the group.

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'It's Bo Chet himself, at least so these chaps swear,' said Mullintosh.

Waring glanced down at the recumbent dacoit, who uttered no sound, but turned a pair of pleading eyes up to him like a beast in pain. 'Not a bit of it,' he said, after a short scrutiny, 'it's no more Bo Chet than I am. It's a man I gave three months to at Minmyo last year. Shwe Myaing, I think his name is.'

- 'Ah, our Thayetbin friend!' exclaimed Mullintosh. 'Well, even that's not so bad; at any rate he's one of Bo Chet's lot.'
- 'Whoever he is,' observed Waring grimly, 'he has done for poor old Smart.'
- 'Good God!' ejaculated Mullintosh, 'I'd almost forgotten about Smart! You don't mean to say he's—he's killed him! Are you sure?'
- 'Certain,—right through the heart. He hasn't moved a finger since. Come

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back with me to the rest-house, will you, and see?'

'I will; but look here, we must lose no time in going after the gang, whether he's dead or not. The sentry says he only saw one man; but if that's one of Bo Chet's happy family the rest ought to be somewhere near. The dirty scoundrels! We'll rout the whole village out and scour the jungle, —but I must have a look at Smart first. He may not really be done for after all. Come along! Hullo! were you hit too, old man?' he exclaimed on a sudden, as the light from one of the lanterns played on Waring's blood-stained arm.

'Yes; I've got something just below my left shoulder, a slug, I think. It feels as though the arm were broken.'

'The deuce it does,' growled Mullintosh, as they hurried hot-foot towards the rest-house; 'that's awkward.'

The dying dacoit lay perfectly still

on the grass in the centre of a gathering crowd. His life-blood was ebbing fast; nothing moved but his eyes, which wandered ceaselessly round the ring of pitiless scared faces. For a while no one spoke or touched him. The throng seemed to look upon the wounded man as a ghastly curiosity, as something to be inspected from a distance but not to be approached inadvisedly. Then some one, a friend of Shwe Zin, exclaimed in an audible congratulatory undertone, 'It will be a hundred rupees, Shwe Zin,' and a man on the fringe of the crowd laughed. Shwe Myaing's eyes sought and rested on the speaker, and he opened his lips as though to say something, but no sound issued. Then his head fell back and he closed his eyes. He was not dead yet, but the bystanders could see that his hours were numbered even before they set about lifting him up to carry him to the police-station. Poor Shwe Myaing! He had achieved his ambition of the moment, but at what cost? The Deputy-Commissioner lay dead in the rest-house verandah, but he was never to know it; the mouths of the scoffers had been stopped, but so, alas! had his own. It was not to be his to witness the casting down of the scornful.

Prominent among those who helped to bear him to the station was Shwe Zin, third-class constable, late from headquarters and the Municipal market, whose breast was swelling with an elation that threatened to burst his tight *khaki* jacket. Happy third-class constable! He too, like the man whose ankles he so lovingly hugged, had secured the great wish of his heart, but, unlike his victim, he was destined to live to enjoy his good fortune. He plodded onward through the dusk, walking on air, oblivious of the weight on his arms, blind to all things ex-

ternal. Before his eyes danced ravishing visions of the entertainment he was going to give at Thonzè; he could hear the banging of the band and see the prima donna's contortions. A hundred rupees! What a show he was going to have for that! Dancers from Mandalay, food unlimited, an entertainment such as had never yet been seen in Thonzè! One hundred rupees! Perhaps now they might make it two! What was that they were saying about the Deputy-Commissioner's being hit? They ought to make it two if the Deputy-Commissioner died. Surely if he did die it would be two. Perhaps in any case! At any rate the hundred rupees were certain, and a first-class constableship to boot. Had not the District-Superintendent said so? There was one light-hearted man in the village that night, but not many more, it is to be feared

'That's awkward,' said Mullintosh a second time as he and Waring neared the rest-house. 'In that case you had better not come with us after the beggars. I tell you what you had better do, if you're up to it, that is, get Miss Smart home as soon as you can; she can do no good here. If Smart is really finished off you might take him in too. There's no knowing how long we may be out after the gang. Besides, you'll have to have your arm looked to. You could send us out baggage and stores from Tatkin, couldn't you?'

The last words were uttered as they reached the foot of the rest-house steps. Here they halted for Mullintosh to issue a few brief orders to the sergeant who had followed them. Then all three mounted the steps softly and entered the verandah in awed silence.

Ethel had not moved from her brother's head since Waring had left her. She rose to her feet, however, as the three men approached, and watched while first Mullintosh and then Heriot stooped over the body to try and detect some sign of life. As each of them raised his head she looked earnestly into his eyes in the hope that she might trace in them some sign of comfort, but there was no spark of encouragement in their gloomy faces. Then she sat down dumb and dryeyed while Mullintosh addressed her quietly. Waring marvelled to see how a few minutes had sufficed to transform the noisy, tactless lout into a clearheaded, resolute man of action.

'Miss Smart,' he said, 'we think it is best that you should get back to Tatkin as soon as possible. I am afraid we can do nothing for your brother, but of course we are not medical men, and if anything can be done for him it will be better done at Tatkin than here, and therefore we

want to get him there without delay. Of course you will go with him. There is a cart all ready below which could take him in to Tatkin in a reasonably short time. Mr. Waring will see you safely home. Will you get ready for the ride? I am sorry we cannot stop with you, but we have to try to get to the bottom of this matter. You understand, don't you?'

She uttered not a word, but rose obediently and turned away to the inner bedroom. When she had drawn the curtain behind her, however, the three men in the verandah heard her pent-up emotion burst out in a muffled choking torrent of sobs.

'This is a damned bad business, you chaps; I wish to God it had been one of us,' said Mullintosh in a husky voice, walking to the edge of the verandah and gazing out into the moonlight. 'Are those men ready?'

he shouted in Burmese a moment later to some one below, and on receiving a reply he turned again to his companions. 'Come along, Heriot,' he 'The police are all ready. said. They will have torches at the station, and we shall see then whether we can find any tracks, though I doubt whether it won't be a wild-goose chase. I've told them to bring our ponies after us, for we may have to ride. Waring, you'll see her safely home, won't you, -and him? There's a cart all ready. I've told two constables off to accompany you; it's just as well to have them. Good-bye, old man; don't forget to send us out some stores to-morrow.'

He disappeared down the steps with Heriot, who had not uttered a word, following him mechanically. Waring watched their attendant lights waver and glance towards the farther end of the village and vanish into the

jungle. Then he turned round with a sigh. He was alone with Ethel in the rest-house.

His first care was for the proper disposal of Smart's body. The servants were clustered below the back verandah chattering in a hushed undertone to the two policemen who were to accompany him to Tatkin. These latter he called up to him, and between them they conveyed the corpse down the steps, and laid it gently on a bed of straw in one of the carts which were to have conveyed the party's effects that evening from Thonzè. This kindly office completed, he gave a few rapid instructions to the servants and returned to the verandah. The table was there as it had stood when Smart was shot. The lamp still shone brightly on the glasses and plates, and on the dark stain that defiled the whiteness of the cloth at one end of the table. He hurriedly hid this

ghastly relic from view with a couple of table-napkins, but the sight of it so unnerved him that he was fain to pour himself out a wineglassful of neat spirit and gulp it down. His arm had been paining him, and he had been feeling sick and giddy, but the fiery draught revived him almost instantaneously. Then for a while he stood silent and listened, waiting for a sound from Ethel.

'Are you ready to go, Miss Smart?' he asked at length, stepping up to the door of the inner room.

No reply came from within, but presently the curtain was drawn back and Ethel came out into the lamp-light. She looked haggard and careworn, her face was tear-stained, but her eyes were now dry and her mouth firm. The first paroxysm of grief was over, and she was perfectly calm and collected. 'I'm ready,' she said; 'shall we start? Have you taken him downstairs?' for

she saw that her brother's body was no longer there.

'Yes,' he replied; 'we have laid him in the cart below. But wait one moment; won't you have something to eat and drink before you go? You will be quite faint before you get home if you don't.'

'Yes, you are right. I will eat a bit of this bread and a little soup. I think there is some port in that bottle over there; I should like a little, please. You are eating something yourself, aren't you? Why, your arm is bad! Let me see if I can do anything for you.'

And before she would touch the wine which he brought her, she insisted on binding up his wound and seeing that his arm was made as comfortable as possible. He suffered her to busy herself about him, seeing that she welcomed eagerly any occupation that would take her out of herself, and

keep her mind from what was lying downstairs in the cart.

'I suppose you would like to go in the cart at your brother's side,' he said when all was ready, and they stood together at the head of the steps. 'You are not up to riding home, I expect.'

'No,' she said softly; 'but don't ride far from me, Mr. Waring. Promise to keep close to me all the way home, won't you?'

Waring gave the required promise, and they were on the point of descending the steps together when she shrank closer to him and murmured: 'Have they got the man who did it?'

'Yes, the sentry shot him,—the second shot we heard, you know. I don't suppose he will live till the morning.'

'How horrible!' she whispered, half to herself, and then turning her haggard face up to his she added: 'He is not below, is he,—that man? I shan't see him if I go downstairs?'

- 'No, no, that will be all right,' Waring made answer. 'They will have taken him to the police-station by this time.'
- 'You are quite certain? I couldn't bear it.'
  - 'Quite.'
  - 'Come along then, let us go.'

• • •

Thus it came to pass that after all Waring rode home that evening alone with Ethel through the moonlight.

## CHAPTER XV

'And now that you have given us a full account of yourself, you must tell us about poor Millicent's faithless young man.'

It was a London drawing-room, a rather dull, ponderously furnished, eminently respectable apartment. Out of doors a cold March wind was flicking long thin drops against the window-pane, and in the street the glistening pavement, the moist umbrellas of the passers-by, the limp, shining oilskins of the stolid policemen (so different from the happy-go-lucky, red-petticoated little guardians of the peace in the land we have left behind us) all reflected the tempestuous mood of the weather. Waring shivered as

he looked out of the window, and was glad to draw still nearer to the fire which blazed cheerily on the farther side of the hearth-rug. He looked pale and weak, which was not surprising, considering what he had undergone since the commencement of the new year. A broken arm is at best an unpalatable possession, and the evil plight of the damaged limb had not been bettered by a long ride into headquarters through the chill of a January night to have the slug extracted and the bone set. Add to this disadvantage an agitated brain and the haphazard treatment of a careless surgeon, and it is small wonder that shortly after his arrival at Tatkin the Treasury-Officer contracted fever with bloodpoisoning, and was forced to lie up for a matter of six weeks. For fully a fortnight after his return to headquarters he was seriously ill, and the first few days of his convalescence were not brightened by the news that Ethel, so soon as he had been pronounced out of danger, had quitted Tatkin for Rangoon and England, leaving the administration of her brother's affairs in Heriot's hands. His one solace through the long hours of recovery, beside the memory of the brief messages from her which had been brought from time to time to his sick-bed, had been the letter which the Deputy-Commissioner's sister had left behind her to be given to him when he was fit to read it; a letter telling in simple, unaffected language of her gratitude for what he had done for her during her short stay in Burmah, more especially in the hour of trial and distress, and of her regret that circumstances should have compelled her to leave Tatkin before he was strong enough to see her and bid her farewell. It concluded with a hope that they would meet again in the future under happier conditions, and this hope Waring found himself echoing with fervour as he sat that morning in his mother's drawingroom and watched the drifting rain from his seat by the fireside. He had arrived in London the previous morning on six months' sick leave, and had repaired immediately to his sole relatives in England, his mother and his sister, to retail his adventures afresh to them, and at their hands to receive the attentions to which, as an interesting invalid from a far country, he felt he was in justice entitled. He had spent an instructive hour and a half of the previous afternoon in narrating and re-narrating to successive relays of thrilled hearers the circumstances connected with Smart's murder and his own wound, and the mind of his sister, who had by this time heard the story repeated several times, now turned to less exciting but to her almost as interesting topics.

For a moment her brother was puzzled. 'Millicent,—Millicent who?' he demanded.

- 'Millicent Dudley-Devant, stupid,' returned Miss Waring, stopping on her way to the window to at once emphasise and soften the final epithet by an admonitory pat on her brother's head. 'Didn't you tell Mother in one of the last letters you wrote before your accident that the man she was engaged to was living at Tatkin?'
- 'Oh, Miss Dudley-Devant,' replied Waring; 'why didn't you say so before? Yes, to be sure; Heriot, the man she was engaged to, was Deputy-Conservator there. He was with us when poor Smart was shot, you know.'
- 'What is he like? Is he nice? I can hardly think so after the way he threw poor Millicent over.'
- 'Oh, he's not a bad sort,—proud, haughty sort of individual. You know the sort, don't you?'

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- 'You are very explicit,—I think I can realise. Is he nice-looking?'
  - 'Pretty fair.'
  - 'Clever?'
- 'Middling,—not much to say for himself,—rather uncommunicative generally.'
- 'Like you, then, or rather like what you used to be, for you are not a bit silent now. You positively made me blush yesterday at the way you carried on with Laura Simmonds. Didn't he, Mother?'
- 'He talked very nicely to Laura, I'm sure,' replied Mrs. Waring, a tranquil, white-haired, white-capped widow, whose reposeful speech and carriage bore a marked contrast to the voice and mien of her energetic, rather masculine daughter. 'It was quite a pleasure to see them together; they made a very handsome couple.'
- 'Go it, Mother,' laughed Waring, and then he added: 'it's solitude, I

suppose, that has done it. Living long alone does make some people unsociable after a bit, I know. It was solitary at Minmyo and no mistake, though I liked it well enough on the whole.'

'Oh, don't talk to me about that appalling place,' cried Gertrude Waring. 'Tatkin must from all accounts have been bad enough, but it can have been nothing to Minmyo. I should have run away straight, and absolutely refused to go back. Let's talk about something pleasanter. Tell me more about Mr. Heriot. Your description of him, coupled with the one Millicent gave me once (before the engagement was broken off), makes him out quite fascinating.'

'Oh, blow Heriot! When was it broken off?'

'Don't ask me; I don't know. Wait a bit, though,—it was some time early in December, I think. Millicent was very low about it at Christmas-

time, I remember; it was very recent then, and she was quite inconsolable.'

'And you say he broke it off, not she?'

'Yes.'

This information gave Waring food for some reflection, and he mused till his mother's voice broke the silence. 'She has not been long in consoling herself since,' she said with a spice of asperity in her tone.

- 'Now, don't be hard on her, Mother,' exclaimed Gertrude. 'You know as well as I do that it's her people, not her.' It is a regrettable fact, but in her more impassioned moments Miss Waring was apt to take unwarrantable liberties with the vernacular.
- 'What awful thing has she done?' asked Waring.
- 'She is engaged again already, you know,' said Mrs. Waring solemnly.
- 'Well, it really isn't her fault,' protested Gertrude. 'You must know,

Rupert, that her people, or at any rate her mother, were always against her marrying Mr. Heriot. I understand that he has very little money. That's so, isn't it? Perhaps you don't know. Well, anyhow they,—or rather she, her mother, you know,—has always had her eye on a Mr. Hexham, a young fellow living near Ventnor who is uncommonly well off. He has always been devoted to her, I believe,—to Millicent, not her mother, you knowbut till now she would have nothing whatever to say to him, and very wisely too, for he's not a nice man at all,—I've met him several times. Well, when the engagement with the horrid, fascinating Burmese man was broken off, Mrs. Devant seems to have badgered and bullied poor Millicent to make her accept Freddy Hexham, until a short time ago she very weakly agreed to give him a chance, and the consequence is that now they are engaged. Awfully foolish of her,' continued this forcible young lady; 'I know she still hankers after the wretch in Burmah, and will never get to like that insufferable little snob.'

- 'Are they going to be married soon?' asked Waring carelessly. Now that Heriot had broken with her, the beautiful Miss Dudley-Devant's doings had no particular interest for him.
- 'As soon as possible, I believe. I understand that Mrs. Devant is in a terrible fright lest the old love should come to England before the wedding and Millicent should change her mind, so they are hurrying everything on in the most indecent manner. I've told Millicent again and again that she ought to put her foot down and make them wait a little, but she is far too good-natured.'
- 'You seem to have struck up quite a friendship with her,' observed her brother.

'Yes, I have. We've corresponded pretty regularly ever since I left the Prices, and I've been to stop with her at Ventnor. Her father is rather a nice old man, a great invalid; but somehow I don't fancy the mother much. She's, — well, — she's not my line at all. Millicent is a dear girl herself, though; I've always selected her for you, ever since I've known her,—in spite of her engagement,—just as Mother has mentally chosen Laura Simmonds with the same object.'

'My dear Gertrude,' protested Mrs. Waring.

'It's no use your denying it, Mother,' pursued the inexorable daughter. 'I know what you're thinking of better than you do yourself. But Millicent is too good for you, Rupert, you know, far too good; she would let you have your own way in everything, which would be very bad for you.'

'So much too good for me that she would be bad for me, eh? You both of you seem precious anxious to marry me off,' laughed Waring, with an amused recollection of how loud his mother had been the day before in her praises of Miss Simmonds,—a plump, comely, rather short-sighted damsel who, he learnt, had been specially invited to meet him. 'How do you know I want to be married?'

'I can see it in your eyes, my dear boy,' replied Gertrude. 'There's no hiding it from me. You'd better tell me who she is straight out; I'll find out for myself sooner or later, if you don't. Whoever she is, though, she won't be such a nice girl as Millicent.'

'Won't she, though!' said her brother, with such assurance and emphasis that both Gertrude and her mother smiled; and then Waring began to wonder whether there might not after all be something in his sister's boast about her power of divination, for she suddenly asked, in a tone which implied that the fresh subject started was a natural complement of what had just been said: 'What has happened to the poor girl whose brother was murdered,—Miss Smart? I suppose she is no longer at Tatkin.'

'No fear,' said Waring; 'of course she could not stop on alone there after her brother's death. She is in England now.'

'Poor thing!' said Mrs. Waring.
'I wonder whether we can do anything for her? She has other relations, I suppose?'

'Oh, dear me, yes; she is with her people down in Surrey. Her father is a country parson near Guildford. I got her address before I left.'

'And you are going down to see her, I suppose,' observed Gertrude, picking up a book and glancing at its back.

'I suppose I ought to,—when I've

got some decent things. In fact, she asked me to look her up,' said Waring as carelessly as possible, for he was vaguely conscious that his sister's eye was fixed critically upon him over the top of the volume she was examining. 'By the bye,' he added, turning in his chair, 'I wish this beastly rain would leave off. I want to get out to my tailor's.'

'You must take care of yourself, my dear boy,' exclaimed his mother. 'I'm so afraid of your going and knocking yourself up, the first thing. Please don't go out at all to-day; you are not fit for it.'

'I really must, Mother, when it clears,' said Waring. 'I am not going to walk about in these things longer than I can help. I shall be all right; I'm as strong as a horse.'

His looks belied his words, as, half an hour later, when the rain had stopped, he sallied forth, much against his mother's wishes, to accord his tailor an interview, a pallid, gaunt figure in a greatcoat green with age and a brown hat which had accompanied him to Burmah six years before. He was conscious that his haggard, unkempt appearance attracted here and there a glance of chastened wonder as he elbowed his way through the well-dressed crowds that thronged Piccadilly and Bond Street, enjoying the brief glimpse of sunshine that had been vouchsafed after the rain. But he recked little of the impression he made on the passers-by; he was wholly engrossed, as he walked along, drinking in the old sights and sounds and smells with automatic relish, in the prospect of seeing Ethel Smart again amid the happier surroundings referred to in her letter. He had obtained her address in England from Heriot before he left; but beyond this he had been able to learn nothing about her from his friend, who after Smart's death always

assumed a sphinx-like demeanour whenever the late Deputy-Commissioner's or his sister's affairs were discussed. Of how Ethel was getting on in England he had been able to ascertain practically nothing, much less of what her attitude towards the Forest-Officer had been at the time of her departure from Tatkin; nor was he any wiser as to how Heriot had employed the long hot days during which he himself had been lying helpless in his darkened bedroom in the Mess. He could not, however, believe that Ethel and the Forest-Officer could have come to any sort of understanding before the former left for Europe, for nothing had been said to him on the subject by the other residents of the gossip-loving little station before his own departure for England, and he tried hard to persuade himself that the belief that had haunted him during his illness, the belief that Heriot had broken off his engagement with Miss Devant in

order to be free to propose to Ethel, was a creature of his own prolific imagination. The news that his sister had given him that morning, regarding the date of the breaking-off and the party who had taken the initiative, certainly tended to confirm that belief, and he was far from being clear yet of the shadow of harassing surmises. Still, after all, he remembered, there was no knowing anything for certain. Heriot was in Burmah, a continent and a half away; Ethel was within easy reach. The sun was shining through the watery clouds, and the brisk March wind was sending the blood dancing through his In his present frame of mind and body he felt that, come what would, he would yet compass his cherished ends and secure his heart's desire.

## CHAPTER XVI

It was some time before Waring was able to pay his projected visit to Miss Smart in her country home. Very soon after his arrival in England,-how soon his mother and sister were never destined to know—he wrote to the address he had obtained from Heriot, enquiring after Ethel's welfare, and implying that he would much like to be permitted to call and give the latest news of Tatkin and Burmah. For time his letter remained unanswered; so long, indeed, was the interval of silence that Waring, morbidly suspicious when transactions with Heriot were concerned, began to entertain the absurd idea that that inscrutable personage had purposely given him a wrong address, though to what end he could not say. At length, however, a reply from Ethel (written from a remote corner of Yorkshire, where it appeared she was staying with a married sister) quashed his unworthy suspicions. In this she apologised for the delay in answering (which was due to his letter having been detained three days at her Surrey home), and said that she intended returning south about the middle of April, when, she assured her correspondent, her parents and she would be delighted to welcome him at Crookholme. Waring chafed at the prospect of waiting so long, but there was obviously no help for it. He could think of nothing that could possibly take him to her neighbourhood in the north, and was left to gather what meagre comfort he could from the reflection that, as April had only thirty days, the middle of the month would

come some few hours earlier than if it had been March or May. Before breakfast on the sixteenth the impetuous youth had posted a letter, written the night before, enquiring on what day of the succeeding seven he might come down. Again some time elapsed before a reply reached him. The twentieth, however, brought a note from Ethel, saying that she had just arrived from the north, and fixing a day in the following week for his visit. Now that the thing was done, and Ethel's invitation was safely in his hands, his importunity struck Waring as singularly tactless and ill-advised, and he could have kicked himself for not having allowed Ethel to write first to him after her return home. Yet it was mainly, if not entirely, the thought of the view which Ethel's relatives might take of his precipitancy that troubled him. Ethel herself, he felt pretty sure, would, if she interpreted his impatience aright, condone it. Was there ever a

love-sick swain that did not delude himself into the belief that the one and only excess which could never by any chance be objectionable to his adored one was excess of devotion?

She certainly did not look as if she were offended at his zeal when he saw her at the station. A newly-opened branch line, cut ruthlessly through one of the most picturesque portions of Surrey, brought him about noon to Crookholme. As soon as the train drew up at the long bleak platform, he saw that she was there, eagerly scanning the carriage-windows, and almost before the smile of recognition sweetened her face he made the discovery that black suited her to perfection. She looked pale, paler somehow than he had expected to find her in England, and her pallor was heightened by her sombre dress and the warm colouring of her hair, which had never in Burmah struck him as being so luxuriant or so

richly hued; but what impressed itself most on Waring as he descended from the compartment and moved forward to meet the girl, was the fact that she was looking far older and more careworn, though not less attractive, than when he had seen her last. She had parted from him at Tatkin a girl, little more than a child, to step again into the circle of his surroundings a woman, little less than a woman fully matured; and her very womanliness, as she stood there opposite him on the platform with the light of greeting in her eyes told him, more plainly than any words could have, what she must have gone through in the interval which had elapsed since her brother's death. His next thought, curiously enough, was how that brother must have in life resembled his parent. There was no taking the broad-shouldered man in clerical garb who stood by Ethel's side for any one but Smart's father. It was

quite a shock to Waring to see his late friend's rugged features reproduced with almost painful fidelity in the Rector of Crookholme's. The father's red hair was now mellowed with grey, his back bowed slightly under the weight of years, but in all other respects the Rector stood there, clean-shaven and thick-set, the image of his dead son, causing his offspring to live again in him in a manner strangely paradoxical. He greeted Waring with warmth, murmuring something, which the shouts of the porters and the hissing of the engine prevented the traveller from catching in full, about friendship with his dear son and kindness to his daughter, and then turning rapidly, led the way, just as Smart would have done, from the crowded platform into the quiet country road outside.

It was an exquisite day—one of the first of the year which could be construed by a shivering visitor from the East into a pledge of genial warmth

to come. The hedges on all sides shimmered with a tender growth of green. In the lanes the catkins flaunted yellow, the sun shone cheerily on the common land and copse, and the birds chirped earnestly together of the inclement March and of the kindly May that nestled for them in the warm bosom of the future. Waring drank in these vernal sights and sounds with the same grateful sensation as that with which he inhaled the country air. It was the first glimpse of rural life he had enjoyed since his return to England, and after the first interchange of questions was over and they had turned up into the long village street, he began to expatiate on this fact to Ethel.

'It is my first spring in England for seven years,' he said, 'so you may imagine how I appreciate it. How green everything is; one doesn't realise a bit in town how spring is going ahead out here. It is jolly to see the daisies

all out, to say nothing of the primroses, and the lambs cutting about in the fields so precious pleased with themselves. I'd almost forgotten what lambs looked like. I feel as though I should like to lie down and wallow in the grass. What wouldn't the people in Tatkin give for a field of daisies now?'

'What, I wonder,' returned Ethel, while the Rector exclaimed: 'What! Have you nothing of a spring in Burmah then?' He was confident in his own mind, was this insular parson, that there was nothing worthy of the name of spring in the benighted East, but he liked to be assured of the fact out of the mouths of experts.

'There's nothing like a good old English spring,' returned Waring. 'A good many of the trees put on fresh leaves about now, but I can never make out why they should; I know I should never have the energy. There's no feeling of fresh life in the air, never

anything to suggest the idea of sprouting. It gets hotter and hotter every day; the crickets do nothing but drone, drone, drone; and they bring you in things they call mangoes, tasting of nothing but turpentine and sugar and water, and think you're going to be comforted by them; and then that beastly hot-weather bird begins. You've heard him, haven't you, Miss Smart?'

'Once or twice only last January,—never properly.'

'Well, you've missed nothing. To me it is the most dreary sound in creation, not in itself so much as because it suggests the long depressing hot season. Ugh! Why, only the other day I was looking out of my window in town rather disgusted at the cold, cheerless weather,—almost,—not quite,—yes, you may think it funny after what I've just been saying—but almost wishing myself back in the sunshine of Burmah, when all of a sudden I heard a street-boy

whistling below, going up the scale in a way that reminded me irresistibly of our friend the hot-weather bird, and I assure you it didn't take a moment to reconcile me to the cold and wet of England.'

'And to make you wish you need never see Burmah again, I suppose,' suggested the Rector.

'Well, hardly that,' said Waring with a sudden turn; 'the hot season is pretty bad, but there's no denying that life during the cold weather out there is glorious, absolutely glorious. It's all very well for me to talk now, but before September I expect I shall be yearning for the green paddy-plains with the hills beyond, and the creak of the cart-wheels, and the clicking of the looms underneath the houses.'

'Ah, yes, and the thud of the ricepounders as you ride through the villages,' put in Miss Smart.

'Yes, not forgetting the rice-

pounders,' said Waring. 'But still in April one is better here than there; no one can deny that.'

'I wish I had seen more of Burmah,' said Ethel in a tone so suggestive of tender memories that Waring, his heart beating tumultuously, for a moment wished the Rector of Crookholme at the opposite end of his parish. As he did not reply, she added: 'Tell me about Tatkin. I feel as though I had been away years.'

He gave her what news he had to give, but soon discovered not only that she was posted up in the doings of the place up to the date of his departure, but that she was able to tell him much that he did not know of what had occurred since he had quitted Tatkin. 'How did you come to hear about all this?' he asked at length, not without a vague indefinable qualm, which was not allayed when Mr. Smart said: 'We hear pretty regularly from Ethel's friend, Mr. Heriot. He gives Ethel the news.'

'Business letters, of course,' explained Ethel, as though anxious that there should be no misconception. 'You know he is looking after poor Jack's affairs in Burmah. He writes from time to time to report progress, and he generally manages to give us some of the gossip of the Station in his letters.'

Waring was relieved; in the circumstances Heriot could hardly avoid sending an occasional letter to Crookholme. He did not altogether relish the idea of the Forest-Officer's being thus enabled to keep his memory green at the Rectory; but he felt certain that if his rival had been communicating with Ethel in a capacity more intimate than that of administrator of her brother's affairs, the Rector and his daughter would have made no secret of the matter to him.

By the time these reflections had flitted through Waring's mind they had

reached the white gate of the Rectory, and passing through it, found themselves in front of a white house facing a welltimbered lawn which sloped almost imperceptibly from a level of a foot or so above the gravel drive up to a low iron railing, just visible between the trees separating the garden from a meadow beyond. The front of the house was covered with wisteria and roses, the former already giving bright promise of its lilac clusters, the latter not yet in bloom, but clinging lovingly to the pillars and trellis-work of the porch, where the three halted for a moment to look up the garden.

'Those are some of the finest cedars in Surrey, and I think, when you've seen them properly, that you'll admit that those beeches are hard to beat,' said the Rector, waving his hand proudly in the direction of the lawn. 'I'll show you round the garden after lunch; you'd like to see it, wouldn't you? But you

my wife.'

Mrs. Smart was sitting in the drawing-room to the left of the little narrow entrance-hall when her guest was ushered into her presence. She was a slight, delicate-looking woman who, Waring perceived, had dowered her youngest daughter with her own slender figure and regular features, and by her own dark hair had tempered the fiery paternal red down to the rich shade of auburn which graced Ethel's head. Ethel's mother must have been very handsome in her youth, Waring thought, as at her invitation he took a seat opposite her by the fire and had an opportunity of scanning her face; but she seemed altogether out of place in the country Rectory, too languid and fragile for the rough parish-life in which the energetic Rector lived, moved, and rejoiced; and the more he saw of her the more clearly he gathered from her

demeanour that she was not altogether happy in her rural surroundings. She had a kind smile of welcome for the stranger, but beyond giving vent to a few commonplaces about the weather, and expressing a hope that Waring was not feeling the cold so much as her daughter had felt it on arriving in England in February, she had but little to say to her guest, and was content to let the burden of hospitality rest for the most part on her husband and daughter. Some instinct told Waring that Ethel and her mother had few interests in common, and he was not long in discovering where the sympathy and community of tastes lay, for it was her father whom Ethel selected to assist her in entertaining Waring throughout the day and to whom she appealed on all occasions.

They lunched in a quaint, low-ceiled dining-room, a step lower than the passage outside, hung around with prints

in broad, polished brown frames, and wandered afterwards, Ethel between the Rector and his guest, round the redwalled back-garden, where the cherryblossoms shone white, through the shrubbery and orchard, underneath the incomparable cedars and the beeches which, the visitor made no attempt to deny, were very hard to beat, and finally up the road to where, near some disused chalk-pits, an ample view was to be had of the rolling wooded country which rose and fell round Crookholme. The scene was peaceful, quiet, and ideally English, totally different from the one which used to delight Waring's eyes in his highperched bungalow at Minmyo; yet in a manner it recalled to him the brightlytinted treasures of that prospect, so that when the Rector exclaimed, in a tone as of triumphant proprietorship in the landscape, 'You have nothing like that in Burmah now,' he was in a moment up in arms, with Ethel, defending the

æsthetic properties of the country of his labours with as much ardour as he had depreciated its hot weather a few hours before.

Mr. Smart smiled at the fervour of the young people's description, and at length exclaimed with a chuckle: 'I wonder you ever succeeded in tearing yourself away from Burmah, Ethel; you seem positively enamoured of the country. This is quite a new development; I believe you will be wanting to go back next.'

Ethel made answer by a solemn shake of the head, her lips pursed tightly up.

'Wouldn't you care to go back, Miss. Smart?' asked Waring. He put the question unthinkingly, but it dawned upon him soon after the words were out of his mouth that, coming from him, a deeper meaning might possibly be placed on them than he had intended to convey when he spoke.

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'I'm not sure that I would,' replied Ethel, with her eyes still dwelling dreamily on the distant view. 'It's a beautiful country, and I shall always have pleasant memories of the happy time I had there; but Tatkin will for ever be associated in my mind with,—with poor old Jack, you know.'

It was the first direct reference that had been made that day to the family loss, and Waring was silent; but there was a lingering indescribable something in the tone of Ethel's reply that encouraged him to return to the charge a minute later before anything else had been said. 'Of course Tatkin will always have sad associations,' he continued. 'But after all Tatkin is not Burmah. You always look upon Burmah as ridiculously small, I know, but——'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Why should you think I look upon Burmah as ridiculously small?'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;You said so once at Thonzè,—don't

you remember? You justly observed that the world was small, and Burmah, whatever the Burmans might think to the contrary, even smaller.'

She needed no reminding now. 'What a memory you must have to remember all my silly sayings!' she exclaimed, with a short laugh and a just perceptible flush. 'Well, and don't you think Burmah small?'

'It would be big enough, I think, to give you all sorts of new sensations without forcing you to draw on the old. There must be hundreds of places there that will not remind you of Tatkin any more than,—well, any more than this place does.'

'Perhaps,' said Ethel; and the memory of the good fellowship that his words had brought back seemed to fill the glance she gave Waring with such kindliness that for the second time during the day he found himself longing that his host would have the good taste

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to discover that his presence was needed elsewhere.

It is just possible that the host may have had a shrewd idea of what was at the moment passing in his guest's mind. When the question of Ethel's possible return was broached and began to be discussed with such seriousness, the Rector's bushy red eyebrows went up, though he still kept his gaze fixed immovably on the distant prospect, and as the talk grew to his attentive ear more and more suggestive of tender sentiments unuttered, the suspicion of a grim smile crept across his weatherbeaten face, but he held his ground manfully and at Ethel's last word struck in.

'Well, Ethel,' he said, 'whether you would like to go back again to Burmah or not, I don't see that there is the slightest chance of your doing so;' and then he added in a brisker voice, 'Come along, it's getting chilly, isn't

it? Shall we walk back by the Manor House? We shall be home just in time for tea.'

Waring travelled up to town by a train which left Crookholme soon after tea at the Rectory was over. Ethel and her father accompanied him to the station and, as they stood on the platform by the carriage-door just before the train started, the traveller extracted from his companions a promise that they would, if possible, look him up the next time they visited London.

'I daresay we shall be coming up to town some Tuesday early next month to gloat over the shops,' said Ethel, 'and we shall certainly try to see something of you, and make the acquaintance of your mother and sister. Tuesday is generally the day we select for our pilgrimages to town. It is our freest day. Number forty-five, isn't it?'

'Yes, number forty-five. Mind you let me have a line to say when I am to

expect you. We're off now. Goodbye, and many thanks for a very pleasant day.'

Father and daughter walked some distance of the way home in silence. At length Ethel slipped her hand through the Rector's arm and said, rather shyly, 'What do you think of him, Father, honestly now?'

- 'You really wish me to say?'
- 'Yes, say everything you want to say about him. You know what I think.'
- 'Well, I think he is a particularly nice, honest fellow. I almost wish I hadn't seen him.'
  - 'Why?'
- 'Why, because I've taken such a fancy to him, and of course if you——'
- 'There's no doubt he is very nice. I've always said that, haven't I, Father?' said the girl as the Rector broke off.
  - 'You have, my dear.'
  - 'And of course he practically saved

my life once, and was so good to me when poor Jack died, so I must be nice to him, mustn't I?'

- 'Indeed you must; it's the very least you can do.'
- 'But you don't expect me to do more, do you?'
- 'Of course not, my dear. It must come spontaneously, that sort of thing.'

There was a pause and then the girl said: 'Thanks, Father, for doing what I asked you.'

- 'Don't thank me, child. I was very nearly basely deserting you when he began about your going back to Burmah. I felt quite sorry for the poor lad, and, besides, I'm not sure that it would not have been best to get the thing over.'
- 'Don't, Father; I wonder what would have happened if you had left us.'
- 'I think I can guess,' and the Rector indulged in a short laugh. 'Yes, there's no doubt about it, he seems a first-rate fellow, and yet,—I suppose——'

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Ethel shook her head slowly. 'I'm afraid not, Father,' she said; 'I really am afraid not. I shall always like him very, very much, but——'

From which conversation it may be gathered that, whereas Waring was at all times scrupulously careful to conceal his tender passion from the eye of his mother, Miss Smart had, on the contrary, been at pains to take her father to a certain extent into her confidence in regard to the question of the bestowal, or perhaps it would be more correct to say the withholding, of her affections.

#### CHAPTER XVII

On his arrival at his mother's house that same evening, Waring found his sister so brimful of news that for some little time she gave no thought to enquiring how he had prospered in the country during the day, and what he thought of Miss Smart as viewed through the medium of an English environment. She looked sharply up from her seat at the writing-table as he entered the drawing-room and greeted him with, 'Well, you are a perverse boy.'

'What's the matter now?' said Waring, with his hand on his mother's shoulder. She was sitting near the fire and he had just stooped to kiss her.

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- 'Matter? Isn't it matter enough that you should be away gallivanting about over the country the very day I wanted you to be at home?'
- 'You never told me you wanted me to be at home.'
- 'Of course not; how was I to tell that she was coming to-day?'
  - 'Who?'
  - 'Millicent, to be sure.'
- 'Oh, your dear Millicent has been here, has she?'
- 'She has, and naturally I wanted my dear Millicent to see you and you to see her, and there you were, if you please, carrying on instead with a young woman in the wilds, goodness only knows where.'
- 'You surely didn't want him to carry on with Miss Devant, did you?' laughed Mrs. Waring, while Waring, ignoring the home-thrust conveyed in his sister's hint as to the manner in which he had been spending his day at Crookholme,

- said, 'What has brought her up to town so suddenly?'
- 'Matrimony. They are going to be married in a fortnight hence—do you hear?—a fortnight hence!'
  - 'Well?'
- 'Well! Do you realise, my dear boy, what that means? It means, in the first place, that it will be May.'
- 'Well, there's nothing very much in that. It's an unlucky month, I know, but——'
- 'Nothing much in that! No self-respecting person is ever married in May, especially not in town. Then in the second place it means that everything will have to be made in a fortnight,—less than a fortnight now.'
- 'I should have thought they could have knocked a decent wedding-cake together in that time,' observed Waring. 'I knew a chap in Rangoon once who——'
  - 'Wedding-cake!' exclaimed Ger-

trude, who found the only sure vent to her contempt for her brother's obtuseness in repeating, in a tone of ineffable scorn, such of his words as most glaringly demonstrated his ignorance. 'Whoever thinks of the wedding-cake! One thinks of the bridegroom before the cake, if he is presentable! You know as well as I do that it was the trousseau I was talking about. A fortnight, imagine,—and not a solitary idea has the poor thing got yet about sleeves or anything, so far as I can make out. I call it wicked; I had a good mind to refuse to be bridesmaid.'

'Oh, so you are going to be one of the bridesmaids,' said her brother.

'The bridesmaid, if you please, the only one. Just as well she didn't want more. She wouldn't have found many girls ready to take it up at such short notice, I can tell you. I suppose that is why she asked me. I can think of no other reason except that she has no

girl-relations in town. She is going to be married in town, from an aunt's house, apparently. A fortnight! The prospect is too awful to contemplate!'

'And why is there such a hurry?' enquired Mrs. Waring, who had been knitting placidly through the perfervid torrent of her daughter's talk.

'Didn't you hear Mrs. Devant, Mother? Oh, of course, you didn't; you were talking to Millicent at the time. "My dear," she said to me most mysteriously (you know the way she says my de-ar), "my dear, I suppose you know that odious man is coming home."

'Who? Heriot?' asked Waring, his interest suddenly aroused.

'The very same. I told her I knew nothing, and she went on to say that somehow (how, she did not deign to inform me) she had heard that he had got leave and would be home about the middle of May. "And I am determined,

my dear," she said, shoving out her fat double chin and wagging her old head at me, "that Millicent shall be safely married to Freddy Hexham before that man puts foot on English soil." She's frightened lest Millicent should try and back out of it. Have you heard anything about his coming, Rupert?'

'Not a word. What rot!' said Waring scornfully. 'You say he broke it off. Why should he want it on again?' A hope, remote enough in itself, but fostered by a remark which Gertrude had let fall on a previous occasion had, at the news of Heriot's impending return from Burmah, arisen in his breast only to fade before the knowledge that the wedding was being expedited in order to obviate a contingency which (for he was only human after all) he could not but wish might in some way or other happen. He would have asserted in all sincerity, had he been questioned on the point, that it was his fine innate love of fair play that made him wish to see Heriot given another chance with Miss Devant, but it is not to be supposed that the discerning reader will believe that, in viewing with distaste the idea that every means should be taken to prevent Millicent and her old love from coming together before the former's marriage, our young friend was in reality actuated by so pure a sentiment.

'There is no accounting for the whims of the men-kind,' returned Miss Waring sententiously; 'but still it does seem ridiculous. A fortnight,—I can't get over it! Don't you ever ask me to be one of your bridesmaids at a fortnight's notice, for I won't,' and she turned round to resume her task of letterwriting.

'How did you find Miss Smart, by the way?' asked the mother, and Waring began wondering of what use his precautions had been if Ethel was to be always instinctively connected in his relatives' minds with his own matrimonial prospects.

'Oh, she's very well,' he replied rather abruptly. 'She'll be up in town very shortly,' he added after a brief pause, softening a little as he gazed into his mother's eyes; 'I've asked her to come and look us up. She's a nice girl, and I should like her to know you, Mother.'

'I'm sure I should like to meet her, dear boy,' said Mrs. Waring, while Gertrude, who had been listening to the conversation from her seat at the writing-table, turned suddenly round and asked: 'Is she as nice as she used to be in Burmah?'

'Of course, why not? I say, Gertrude, does Miss Devant know why they are hurrying the wedding on?'

'I should think not. What a question to ask! And even if she did, she would not have the spirit to protest. Why

Mrs. Devant should tell me I cannot conceive, any more than I can guess why Millicent should ask me, a comparative stranger, to be her bridesmaid. Do you know, there must be something very attractive and reassuring about me that all these good people should want to make me their bridesmaid and confide in me. Mind, this about Mr. Heriot must not go beyond you, Rupert,' she continued, as though suddenly alive to the fact that her discretion must seem hardly such as to justify the confidence that had been reposed in her. 'I don't think Mrs. Devant would care to have it generally known why they are in such a hurry.'

'Oh, you may trust me. I'm not a girl,' laughed Waring, glad of the chance of a dig at his sister, and then the dressing-bell put an end to the conversation.

Waring had an opportunity before long of seeing Mr. Hexham's bride elect.

A morning or two after his visit to Crookholme he received at breakfast strict injunctions to be in for lunch, as he was to meet Miss Devant and her intended, who were coming to the house after a morning of shopping. obedience to this behest he presented himself at the appointed time in the drawing-room, and was there introduced by his sister to a tall, fragile-looking girl (in whose pale face he had little difficulty in recognising the features of her of the white neck who had figured so prominently on Heriot's writing-table) and to a sandy-haired youth with round eyes and a thick, tremulous under-lip, who fulfilled in every outward particular his preconceived idea of what the obnoxious but opulent suitor was going to be like. The two were an ill-assorted couple, as ill-assorted, so far as appearances went, as Heriot and Miss Devant would have been the reverse. Waring had made up his mind on this point

before they went down to luncheon. He was obliged to confess to himself soon after the meal had begun that he was not as favourably impressed with Gertrude's friend as, guided by his sister's descriptions of her charms, he had expected to be. He was not, it is true, surprised to find her neither lively nor communicative, but her reserve exceeded his anticipations. He had learned enough about her from Gertrude to know that her apparent haughtiness was merely a cloak for her shyness, but with her reticence she combined such an apathetic, almost vacant, demeanour that he wondered at his sister's making an intimate of so eminently uninteresting an individual. As the meal progressed, however, he began to understand that she was treating this acceptance of her bridesmaid's hospitality merely as one of the preliminaries to a ceremony to which he could see she looked forward with no feeling of pleasure. Whatever

pangs of despised love the Heriot-episode had left behind she was careful to hide. She could pride herself in not having been found wanting in filial duty, but it was clear that she was not going to feign an interest in the details of a wedding that was distasteful to her, or simulate an affection for her betrothed which she did not feel.

Hexham, in marked contrast to the bride elect, was animation itself. The young man was determined to render himself as agreeable as possible, and, with his mind bent to the task, did his utmost to make up for the young lady's lack of conversation at table. Waring soon saw that, though empty-headed and self-sufficient, the youth was perfectly innocuous, and he soon understood from her passive disregard of his banalities how it was that Millicent had prevailed upon herself to look upon a union with him as possible or supportable. He was an infliction, but an infliction which

could be largely ignored, and she was evidently looking to being able to render her married life bearable by treating him in nearly all points as a negligible quantity. She did not speak of Heriot, a fact which Waring took as an indication that her wound still smarted, though when once in conversation he referred to Tatkin her eye lighted and she made as though she would have said something à propos of the place. She did not, however, speak, and it was left to Hexham to rush in where Millicent had feared to tread, though he did not raise the subject of the previous love till after luncheon, when Waring had led him into the little smoking-room at the back of the house, and he sat puffing jerkily at a cigarette, while he trifled with the germ of a diminutive red moustache.

'You knew a chap, Heriot, out in Burmah, didn't you?' he asked.

Waring looked up at him, but Hexham avoided his gaze. 'Yes,' he said; 'I was at a place called Tatkin with him.'

- 'Do you know him well?'
- 'Fairly well.'
- 'You know he was engaged to Miss Dudley-Devant, don't you?'
  - 'Yes.'
  - 'What sort of a chap is he?'
  - 'Don't you know him?'
- 'Never met him; he doesn't come from our part of the country. Millicent met him up in Buckinghamshire somewhere.'
- 'Ah, well,—he's queer rather,—critical and sarcastic—a nasty one to cross, I should think. One never can tell what he's going to be up to next.' He chose his words deliberately, not, I regret to say, without a malicious hope that they might bring some vague sense of discomfort to the hapless youth before him who had supplanted the subject of their conversation. He very nearly added, 'I suppose you know he is coming

home shortly,' for he presumed that neither of the innocents had been let into the secret of Mrs. Devant's precipitation, but he remembered in time the gibe he had cast at his sister only a few days before, and refrained.

- 'A gentleman, I suppose, and all that?'
  - 'Oh, most decidedly.'
- 'Have you any idea why he broke off the engagement?' pursued Hexham the ingenuous, gazing at his interlocutor out of the corner of his red-rimmed eyes, while he plucked at his nether-lip.
- 'He did not tell me,' returned Waring shortly. 'He's not in the habit of indulging in confidences.'
- 'I suppose it was some other girl,' opined Hexham pacifically. 'Are there any decent females out there by any chance? Tatkin I think you said the name of the place was.'
- 'No unmarried ladies,' said Waring still more shortly; the idea of a 'decent

female' in Tatkin having been the cause of Heriot's falling away was one he had no wish whatever to contemplate.

'H'm, that's funny. I suppose he had his reasons. Hope you don't think me inquisitive? It's a matter I'm rather interested in. I've long wanted to come across some fellow that knew the man. I daresay it was some girl he had met in England, though why he should break it off out there I don't know. Thanks,—I'll have another cigarette if I may.'

'Well, what do you think of them?' asked Gertrude, as her brother reappeared in the drawing-room after escorting her guests to the front door.

'Oh, I like her,' was the reply, 'though I don't think she is as interesting as I expected.'

'Thank Heaven, she is not interesting,' returned the sister. 'I shouldn't have anything to say to her if she was. But you do like her?'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;Yes.'

'So does Mother now. You've got over your prejudice against her by this time, haven't you, Mother?'

'I was never prejudiced, dear,' replied Mrs. Waring, and as her daughter laughed incredulously, she added: 'I think she is a nice lady-like girl. She certainly improves on acquaintance, but I don't think I care for the bridegroom much. He seems rather a foolish young man.'

'Oh, he's too terrible for words,' ejaculated Gertrude. 'I always thought he was objectionable, but I never realised till to-day that he was so absolutely inane. He's never tried to be funny before. What do you think of him, Rupert?'

'He's rather a young ass, but harmless enough, I should think. Not so bad as I thought he would be.'

'Did you ever see such eyes and such a mouth?'

'They might be more artistic.'

'And such terrible hair?'

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- 'He's not a beauty, but there's no harm in his hair that I can see.'
- 'Why, you always used to loathe red hair!' exclaimed Gertrude.
  - 'I don't now,' said her brother.

### CHAPTER XVIII

IT was some three or four days before the date fixed for the wedding that Waring was sitting writing in the drawing-room. His mother and sister, enticed by the beauty of the weather, which had begun to take a decided step summerwards, had gone out together, and he had had the house virtually to himself since luncheon-time. For the information of those who may wonder why our friend should have elected to stop indoors for the better part of one of the balmiest afternoons of the year, it must be explained that he had felt, ever since the morning, a vague but pervading conviction that the day was just such a Tuesday as Ethel would be likely to choose for her expedition to town; and he trusted that she might, in the course of her shopping, pass near enough to his mother's house to think of paying her promised visit. So firmly rooted was this idea that when, about halfpast three, the bell rang, and a visitor, who was not to be deterred by the maid's shrill intimation that Mrs. and Miss Waring were out, began to mount the stairs, he rose to his feet with quickening pulse, in the full expectation of seeing Ethel enter. However, it was not Miss Smart, but Miss Dudley-Devant whom the servant announced, and Waring's face fell, with his hopes, lamentably, as he saw the tall, slim figure in the doorway, though he made a manful effort to hide his mortification.

Millicent entered the room hesitatingly on seeing that it was occupied. 'I hear Gertrude is not in,' she said, in a tone of embarrassed apology. 'I'm so sorry. She said she would be in about now, if I wanted to ask her anything, so, as I wished to consult her about dresses, I thought I would sit here and wait for her a moment,—that is, if I may. They didn't tell me you were here. I hope I'm not disturbing you.'

'Not at all; please sit down. I'm very glad you came in. It isn't often I'm in the drawing-room alone,' said Waring, his disappointment sunk in the wish to make Miss Devant feel that she was not intruding. He was obliged to confess that, as she sat near him, looking in front of her with big, melancholy eyes, she was a strikingly well-featured His flow of ideas was not, however, stimulated by his keen perception of his visitor's good looks, and for several minutes the conversation stumbled painfully along, from Gertrude to the wedding, from the wedding to the weather, from the weather at home to the weather

abroad,—in the East,—in India,—in Burmah, and there it had stuck, on Waring's suddenly realising that he was treading on dangerous ground; but, as he was racking his brain during the pause that ensued for some less perilous topic, and wishing that his sister would arrive on the scene quickly, he found himself relieved of all responsibility by his visitor, who during the silence had been looking fixedly at the carpet, beginning in a strained, nervous voice, as though she had set herself to some unpleasant duty,—'Talking about Burmah, you knew Mr. Heriot at Tatkin, didn't you?'

- 'I did,' replied Waring, wondering what his fair visitor expected him to be able to tell her about her late betrothed.
- 'Well?' she asked, just as Hexham had done a few days before; and as to Hexham, so to her he made answer, 'Fairly well.'
  - 'You haven't heard when he's com-

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ing home, I suppose?' she continued, in the same unnatural tone.

'No,—that is,—not definitely,' stammered Waring, in doubt as to how he was to evade a downright untruth in answering the question he felt absolutely certain she was going to put to him next. She did not, however, as he expected, go on to ask him exactly what it was that he had heard, but said, looking suddenly up, 'Is it true that he has arrived in England already?'

'No,—at least not that I've heard of,' exclaimed Waring, this time with such decision and in a tone of such genuine surprise that Miss Devant lowered her eyes with a sigh of conviction. 'I suppose you would have heard if he had,' she murmured, fingering a corner of her neat, well-made jacket.

'I'm pretty sure I should have,' he replied.

There was another pause,—this time

a very long one—and Waring, in no enviable frame of mind, silently watched the girl's pale, handsome face, waiting for her to say something, for he felt there was more coming. At last she spoke, but without looking up, tapping restlessly on the floor the while with the point of her parasol.

'I hope you will excuse my asking you about Mr. Heriot,' she said. 'You know, I suppose, that,—he was once engaged to me?' He gravely nodded assent as she looked at him for a moment, and she went on: 'Of course that's all past now, and I am going to,-to marry Mr. Hexham'-(here she gave an awkward, nervous laugh)-'but you will understand, I think, that I still,—that I must take some interest in what he has been doing, and so I thought that perhaps you might-you know I have never quite understood why he-why he should have-you said you knew him fairly well---'

Her voice died away, and something dangerously like a sob rose into her throat. The sound showed what agony it must be to this shy, reserved girl to lay bare the inmost recesses of her heart to a comparative stranger. She was forcing herself to speak, he could see, humbling herself to a thing from which her soul revolted. Every look, every action recalled to him the occasion months before when he had sat in Mrs. Jones's drawing-room at Tatkin, goaded by his insatiable yearning for fuller knowledge into an abject condition of inquisitiveness. He knew well enough what it was that she wanted to know, but for the life of him he did not see how he could help her out, and it was with a sense of inexpressible relief that at that moment he heard the door-bell ring again and fancied he recognised his mother's voice in the hall.

The sound below served to spur Miss Devant to speech. She broke

the silence, uttering her words with effort, but swiftly, as though there were no time to lose in saying what had to be said. 'He must have had good reasons. Tell me—there was a girl at Tatkin, wasn't there, a sister of one of the men there?'

- 'Yes,' Waring made reply; 'the Deputy - Commissioner's sister, Miss Smart.'
  - 'Do you think he liked her?'
  - 'That I cannot say for certain.'
- 'But what do you think? You've seen them together, I suppose.'
- 'Yes, he certainly did admire her, but of course——' and he broke off with an indefinable sense of disquiet. For a moment, as he pictured to himself Ethel in Heriot's company, he could realise something of the anguish his questioner must be feeling.
- 'Thanks,—that's all I wanted to know. I was sure there must be some good reason—I mean that that was

why—— Did you say the name was Smart?'

- 'Smart, yes, Miss Smart,' said Waring, as the door opened behind him.
- 'Mrs. and Miss Smart,' pronounced the servant incisively, with an emphasis on the Mrs., as though she were correcting Waring, and the young man started, with a burning face, to his feet, and turned, to see Ethel and her mother being ushered into the drawing-room.

The succeeding few minutes passed by him as in a dream. He was but half aware of how he stumbled through the ceremony of introduction; but across the haze of swiftly rushing thoughts came a vision of the deliberate searching look that each of the girls gave as he pronounced the two names, though, as he was obliged to turn to speak to Mrs. Smart, he felt rather than actually perceived the mutual magnetic attraction the one had for the other. His first distinct recollection was of listening to Mrs. Smart, who, seated on the sofa at his side, was explaining in a plaintive treble how it was that she and her daughter had ventured to come in even after they had heard that Mrs. and Miss Waring were out, and of trying in a kind of stupor to follow what she said while eye and brain were concentrated on the two girls, who had gravitated instinctively towards each other, and of whose talk he, ever and anon, caught a fragment in the pauses between the elder lady's slowly delivered sentences.

'So, as we knew that you were in,' said Mrs. Smart, 'and that your mother would be back directly, and that there was a lady waiting for her upstairs, we thought——' and then his mind wandered away, for he heard his sister's name mentioned, and Miss Devant say, 'She is going to be my bridesmaid, you know,' and marked the note of startled enquiry in Ethel's voice as she exclaimed,

'Bridesmaid! What! are you going to be married?' And then Mrs. Smart's insistent tones were borne in upon him again, and he could only gather a disjointed phrase of the girls' talk here and there, such as—'a Mr. Hexham'— 'Less than a week now'---' As soon as that?'--' Get it over soon'--' Suppose I must congratulate you, then,' and observe that Ethel's voice waxed more and more cheerful and her bright face brighter as the conversation took its onward course and new conceptions dawned upon her. A fresh peal on the door-bell roused him more fully to himself, and he had just begun to quake at the prospect of a further feminine invasion, when a familiar voice below told him that this time it was without doubt his mother and sister who had arrived. Mrs. and Miss Waring's entrance was the signal for a general redistribution of the assembled company. Millicent lost no time in

seizing hold of Gertrude and leading her away to a window to discuss a vital point connected with the trimmings of a hat; and Waring, having entrusted to his mother the task of entertaining Mrs. Smart, who was only too ready to enter into a second detailed explanation of her reasons for having come into the house, turned his own attention, with a sense of duty nobly done, to Ethel.

'I am very glad indeed that you have been able to look us up,' he exclaimed, sinking into a seat by her side. 'I had a kind of presentiment that you would call to-day. In fact, that is partly the reason why I stayed in.'

'Did you stay in specially?' she said. 'On such a lovely afternoon that was indeed a sacrifice. In that case, I am very glad we came in, although your mother and sister were out. I hope your mother does not mind.'

'Not a bit. She would have been

very disappointed if you had not come in, and so, of course, should I.'

'Thank you,' she smiled, and then went on—'What a very nice-looking girl Miss Devant is. She is *the* Miss Devant, I suppose; I mean the one Mr. Heriot used to be engaged to?'

'Yes—the same.'

'I thought it must be,—and yet I could hardly believe it when she told me she was going to be married. Isn't it very sudden? It can only be a short time since her engagement to Mr. Heriot was broken off.'

'Yes. She certainly has been pretty quick in getting engaged again, but of course she has known Mr. Hexham for a long time. He's the man she's engaged to, you know.'

'Yes, she told me. What is he like? Anything like Mr. Heriot?'

'Not in the least. A sandy-haired brat of a boy, without an idea of his own. I should like you to see and compare.'

- 'Poor thing, I am sorry for her,' exclaimed Ethel. 'By the bye, I got a letter from him a short time ago,' she added.
  - 'From Heriot?'
- 'Yes. It came a day or two after you were down at Crookholme. He gives all kinds of news. He says Captain Pym and Mr. Stevens got a tiger the other day,—a man-eater. They sat up all night to get him, and were nearly bitten to death by mosquitoes. Mr. Stevens is back again in Tatkin, you know. The Sparrows are transferred to Bhamo, and another married couple are coming in their place, and,—let me see, what else did he say?'
- 'Did he say anything about coming home shortly?' asked Waring, struck with a sudden thought.
- 'Yes,' said Ethel, looking up at him. 'He has got his leave.'
- 'Is he likely to be home soon,—I mean within a week or two?'

'Not that I know of; he did not say. Why do you ask?' She looked up at him again, this time with a look of puzzled enquiry.

'Oh, it's nothing,—merely curiosity on my part,' returned Waring. He felt that he could not tell her all the embarrassing thoughts that the news of Heriot's early return to England had conjured up in his mind; and fortunately there was no call for him to do so. At this moment Miss Devant, who had transacted her business with Gertrude, and had shaken hands with the two elder ladies, came up to them. 'Good-bye, Mr. Waring,' she said.

'What—are you off already?' he exclaimed.

'Yes. I haven't been long settling, have I? I am very busy, and I'm afraid I can't stop to tea. Good-bye, Miss Smart; I'm delighted to have made your acquaintance,' and she held out her hand with a stiffness which

accorded but poorly with the graciousness of the speech.

'Good-bye,' said Ethel. 'I'm sure I wish you every happiness.'

Millicent's lips moved in thanks, and she turned away towards the door.

Waring followed her downstairs and stood by her in the hall, helping her to collect a medley of small parcels which she had left there.

- 'That was a most marvellous coincidence,' she said impressively, with her large eyes fixed upon him.
- 'Wasn't it, by Jove?' returned Waring. 'It quite took my breath away,—just at the very moment that we were talking about her!'
- 'It was quite uncanny,' she said, looking away with a shiver. Her parcels were all collected; he had opened the front door for her, and they had shaken hands. On the threshold she stopped, and with her face

still averted she murmured, 'Do you think her pretty?'

'Yes,' said Waring.

'So do I. I think—I can understand now, — why he broke it off. Good-bye,' and with this tribute to Miss Smart's charms, she left him to his cogitations on the doorstep.

Ethel was talking brightly to his sister when he rejoined the ladies in the drawing-room, and during the rest of her visit he had no opportunity of resuming his conversation with her. He was pleased to see, however, that Gertrude seemed favourably impressed with her brother's friend, and that Mrs. Smart and his mother appeared to have found interests in common. Still, even this knowledge could not allay the unsatisfactory feeling which the news of Heriot's advent, coupled with Miss Devant's parting words, had produced. What was the fellow coming home for just now-confound him! And why should he himself imagine that the fellow's object was to marry Ethel? Was it because Millicent had found in Ethel an answer to the question that had been exercising her mind? Was it because Ethel was so radiant and so well informed as to Heriot's movements? He could not say; all he could be sure of was that the unsatisfactory feeling was there, and that it detracted considerably from the pleasure afforded him by Miss Smart's long-expected visit.

Ethel and her mother left later on, their shopping being completed, to catch a train at Waterloo, and Waring walked with them to the corner of the street to show them exactly where they would be picked up by the omnibus that was to take them to the station. Gertrude looked significantly at her mother when they were alone together after their guests had departed. Mrs. Waring smiled a meaning smile back

at her daughter, but said nothing. There was no need for speech; mother and daughter had seen enough that afternoon to perceive exactly how the land lay with regard to a young man in whom they were both interested.

- 'It fully explains one thing that has been puzzling me for the last few days,' said Gertrude.
  - 'What is that?'
- 'Why, that he should have suddenly left off disliking red hair. It really is a very pretty auburn.'

Mrs. Waring laughed. 'She seems a nice, quiet girl,' was all she said.

- 'He might have done worse.'
- 'Though I don't think she will make him as good a wife as Laura Simmonds.'
- 'Oh, bother Laura,' said Gertrude impatiently; 'he'll never look at her. And how are we to know, mother, that she, she, I mean, will ever look at him? There we go, talking as though

both parties had made up their minds. There may be all kinds of complications. I'm not sure yet that I can make out where Millicent's faithless young man comes in,' and then, unconsciously reechoing the sentiment to which Millicent had shortly before given voice, she added, 'I'm not at all certain, now that I've seen her, that she,—she of course I mean again—doesn't explain why it was broken off.'

The two women sat for some time in thought. To Gertrude, if not to her mother, it seemed clear that the case presented difficulties. In any case there was a tacit understanding between them that the subject was not to be touched upon lightly. Thus it was that on Waring's return home, although he found himself rallied by his sister on having been discovered surrounded, like the giddiest of lady-killers, by a bevy of fair dames in the drawing-room, he was not, as he expected to be, chaffed by

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that ordinarily unmerciful young woman for his devotion towards the younger of his visitors from Crookholme.

Both mother and daughter, however, called him severely to task for not having told them that he had saved Miss Smart's life in Burmah, and treated his assurance that he had done nothing of the kind with severe disdain.

## CHAPTER XIX

AFTER what two of his visitors had said about Heriot's coming to England, Waring was in a manner prepared for what the day following Ethel's expedition to London had in store for him. He had just come in from his morning walk on that day, and was in the act of settling down in his den to a pipe and a novel when his solitude was broken in upon by the servant, with the information that there was a gentleman in the hall who wished to speak to him. Following on the heels of the handmaiden, treading with a firm leisurely tread over the oilcloth came the said gentleman, and, even before his visitor's spare, straight form was visible, Waring had a vivid foreknowledge of his identity. There was a kind of fatality about the course events were taking against which he felt that he was powerless to struggle, and he could only ejaculate rather helplessly when Heriot entered, 'I didn't think you would be in England yet.'

'You knew I was coming home, then,' said Heriot, standing opposite his friend, well-groomed, unruffled, and sedate as ever, with the air (so it seemed to Waring) of having been in England for months.

'Yes,' said Waring, 'Miss Smart told me. She was here yesterday.'

'Ah—Miss Smart. She was here yesterday, was she? I hope she is well. She is at Crookholme still, I suppose?'

He supposed she was still at Crookholme! He did not know for certain then! That did not sound as if his object in coming home was what Waring dreaded. He must have been mistaken after all, and a great load seemed lifted off his heart as he said: 'Yes. She came up yesterday for the day only.'

- 'H'm. That reminds me, I must see her within the next few days, or write to her,' and the visitor stood thoughtfully jingling the silver in his pockets, with his eyes on the hearthrug. 'And how are you, Waring?' he continued, looking up. 'Shoulder all right by this time, I hope?'
- 'Quite fit and strong, thanks, and having a very good time. How are you? You look uncommonly well. I say, won't you sit down?'
- 'No, thanks; I'll stand if I may. So you're having a good time; that's capital.'
- 'First-rate,—never thought I should enjoy a spring so much. You've come in for the pick of the weather. What are you home on?'

- 'Urgent private affairs—very urgent,' and he laughed a short dry laugh as he looked up again. 'I've got six months to do them in too.'
  - 'Where are you staying?'
- 'At the Charing Cross Hotel. I'm only in town for a few days looking up old friends, at least such of them as I can find. May I light a cigarette?'
- 'Do. You won't have a cheroot, I suppose? I have some Burmans here.'
- 'No, thanks; I carry my own tobacco about with me always.' He lit his cigarette as he spoke, and, holding the match up, gazed at it pensively while it flared itself out. 'It's nice to get hold of a wax match again,' he said. 'By the bye,' he added, as though the thought had at the moment occurred to him, 'talking of old friends, I think you said once that you,—or your sister—knew Miss Dudley-Devant?'
  - 'My sister,-yes, I did,' said Waring.

He was beginning to have an inkling of how the land lay.

- 'I suppose you have met her?' continued Heriot. 'She is up in town, I believe.'
  - 'Yes, she is.'
- 'You don't happen to know her address, I suppose?'
- 'No,' said Waring, slowly and with deliberation, 'I don't.'

Such is the innate perversity of certain pig-headed specimens of the human breed! What Waring said was absolutely correct. He did not know the address; he had, so far as he could recollect, never heard it, but perhaps it is needless to say that it would not have been a very difficult matter for him to find it out for Heriot. His mother was upstairs and knew it, he had no doubt; in any case there was a little red morocco-bound book in the drawing-room bearing the title Where is it? which would certainly have given it in

a moment, for his sister kept it religiously up to date; and yet he made no attempt to assist the Forest-Officer by asking his mother or referring to the address-book. And his refusal to help was no act of stupid churlishness. Some words that his sister had once uttered came back to him now: 'I understand that Mrs. Dudley-Devant is in a terrible fright lest the old love should come to England before the wedding and Millicent should change her mind.' It looked as if the worthy matron's apprehensions were about to be realised, and if so, who, it might well be asked, could wish them to be realised more than he? Yet for all this he held his peace; and the only reason he could have assigned for so doing was that his suspicion regarding the motive for Heriot's question and the hope of the advantage to himself that might come of the meeting between Heriot and Millicent seemed to make it a dishonourable thing for him to give the address. It was precisely the same mulish feeling that had silenced him once before when in his heart of hearts he would have liked to tell Ethel of Heriot's engagement.

'Ah, well, it's of no consequence,' said Heriot, with a nonchalance that showed that he had regained the perfect command over his voice and features that, as Waring remembered, he seemed to have partially lost at Thonzè. 'There were some other addresses, though, that I wanted to get out of you. Let me see now, what were they? Ah yes, there was that skinman you told Pym about at Tatkin. I've brought home a couple of leopardskins that I want done up, and your friend would probably be the man for me. Can you tell me where he lives?'

'That I can,' replied Waring; 'I've got a bill of his somewhere,' and he turned to search among the papers on his writing-table. 'It's not down here,' he said presently, after a fruitless examination of several bundles. 'I'll tell you where it is, though; it's upstairs. Do you mind waiting a minute while I go up to my bedroom and fetch it? Make yourself comfortable while I am gone, will you?'

Heriot watched the door close behind Waring's back and, sitting down, swore softly to himself. He was evidently put out about something. For a minute or two he sat puffing moodily at his cigarette; then, as Waring did not return, he rose, and taking from a shelf the first book that came to hand, a copy of Shakespeare's works, seated himself again, opened it, and began to read. After a while he stopped and gazed abstractedly out over the volume at the dreary black piles of bricks and mortar visible outside the window. He had just come by the merest chance across a passage which he felt exactly represented his feelings at the moment. They were well-known lines; he was pretty sure he had come across them before, but never till now had they appealed to him with such insistent force. He read them through slowly again.

—For it so falls out

That what we have we prize not to the worth, Whiles we enjoy it; but being lacked and lost, Why, then we rack the value; then we find The virtue that possession would not show us Whiles it was ours.

He repeated the words softly to himself two or three times, and then drew a letter from his pocket and gazed long and reflectively at the envelope. If he could ever have looked pathetic, he would have at that moment. He was reviewing the past.

He had been engaged to Millicent while in England on short leave some two years before, about eighteen months prior to the events chronicled on the

earliest of these pages. He and the young lady had seen very little of each other before the engagement. Heriot's leave terminated shortly after that happy consummation was reached: his pay was insufficient then to allow him to support a wife; and he had to bid farewell to his betrothed for a period of not less than two years, after an acquaintance that barely extended over a month in all. It may safely be said that, when they parted for an indefinite time, they were as devoted to each other as two lovers well could be, and, in Heriot's case, it was more than a year before the inevitable reaction set in; but by the beginning of the previous December he had begun to accept as inevitable the knowledge that his ardour had suffered a very appreciable diminution, the more appreciable as, with Ethel's arrival at Tatkin, he was brought in agreeable contact with a fresh and, for him, particularly attractive type of English girlhood. It was the feeling he experienced as, day after day, he saw more and more of the newcomer, which told him first, not only that there were other girls in the world than Millicent Devant, but also that there were other men than John Heriot; for, as he reflected how readily he had found that after all life without his betrothed might be bearable, he began to understand how easy, if not natural, it must have been for Millicent to have by that time made a corresponding discovery. The thought led him, by simple stages, to imagine that he detected in Millicent's letters, now less numerous than of yore, the cankering growth of indifference under which he himself lay, so that, when at length he determined to free himself once for all from the engagement, he felt charitably sure that, whatever outward display of reluctance the young lady might make, she would at heart be only too glad to

meet him half-way. He did not know how the prospect of marriage with Hexham (of old an importunate wooer), which the helpless Millicent felt could be the only other alternative, had served to strengthen the bond that united her to the man she loved. What had at the best of times been for him a tie of but moderate strength was for her the cable that linked her to her anchor of hope, the severing of which spelt ruin. What she thought she did her best to show in the letter a portion of which we have read over Heriot's shoulder, and, as we have seen, her cry for pity he took for what he considered it was worth. But it was soon after this that, his bridges once burned behind him, the revulsion set in that proved the eternal truth of the lines he was at that moment repeating to himself. For some days after the decisive step had been taken all his feelings were swallowed up in the sense that Ethel was the one woman in the world to make him as happy as he deserved to be, and, had it not been for Smart's sudden death, there is no doubt that he would have put a momentous question to her before the close of the expedition to Thonzè, nor would there be much difficulty in guessing what the reply to that question would have been. But, as it was, with the Deputy-Commissioner's murder came delay, and with delay came reflection, and with reflection misgiving as to the actual depth of his passion; and with the way made smooth with his only possible rival removed from his path, and with his prize daily within easy reach, he began to discover that the situation often failed to provide friction sufficient to keep the warmth of his admiration for Ethel at the glowingpoint, and soon found himself calling regretfully to mind those virtues in Millicent to which the sense of ownership had so obstinately blinded his eyes. Thus it was that he said no word to Ethel before she quitted Tatkin for England, and let her go with but little to support her fond hopes but the recollection of past devotion and the knowledge that the writing to her of an occasional business-letter about her brother's affairs would prevent her image slipping entirely from his memory.

It is possible that, after she had gone, the same forces might have operated to endear Ethel as had made themselves felt in the case of Millicent, had not Heriot's renewed passion for the latter been stimulated by the receipt of a copy of an Isle of Wight newspaper setting forth in a paragraph, carefully marked, that a marriage had been arranged between Miss Millicent Dudley-Devant, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Herbert Dudley-Devant of St. Cuthbert's, Ventnor, and Mr. Frederick Hexham of Compton Hall, Shanklin. In this

delicate attention our friend thought he detected the handiwork of Mrs. Devant, who had throughout been opposed to his suit, and might be expected to take a malicious pleasure in proving to him that the wound he had inflicted had not been long in healing; and the desire to thwart her added fuel to the flames. He would, however, have taken no definite action had not a piteous letter, —the letter he was holding in his hands as he sat in Waring's chair-come from Millicent, saying that she had learnt what her mother had done, and assuring him that her coming marriage was odious to her, and that, so far as he was concerned, her feelings were unchanged. This last communication brought forcibly home to Heriot what a power of stedfastness there was in the writer's love for him. A quarter of an hour after he had read it he had made out his application for leave on urgent private affairs (a death in the family afforded a suitable pretext), and before the middle of April he had left Burmah for England, with the intention of seeing the victim before her marriage.

How to get speech with Millicent before the eventful day was the problem he had now set himself to solve, and he found it by no means an easy one. His first step on reaching London had been to travel to Ventnor, and there try to ascertain the latest news of Millicent: but, as events proved, his journey to the Isle of Wight was practically fruitless. A sprightly and communicative servant at the house informed him, on enquiry, that Mrs. and Miss Devant had gone to London; that she understood that Miss Millicent was going to be married there shortly, though exactly when she could not say; that she did not know the address the ladies were stopping at in town, though she dared say that he would like to come in and see Mr. Devant, who, she was sure, would be able to give him all

the information he required. Heriot liked Millicent's father, and would ordinarily have been ready enough to have a chat with the elderly invalid; but for reasons of his own he had no wish to see him on that particular occasion, and left without giving his name, to formulate a fresh plan of action in London. It was not till after his return to town that he suddenly remembered that Waring's sister was acquainted with Miss Devant, and that he might conceivably be able to get the address from his friend. He felt certain that Waring would gladly further any action tending to show that he was going to be left alone in the running for the prize they had both been competing for hitherto, and he lost no time in looking him up. He was surprised when the time came to find his friend professing total ignorance of Millicent's address; but so sure was he of Waring's perception of what was to his own interest, that on hearing

his emphatic denial he thought it mere waste of valuable time to press him further on the point. Now that he had a second time been foiled, it was necessary to consider his next move seriously; but, cast about him as he would, no delicate inspiration came. He could think of no one else in London who was at all likely to be able to give him the information he required regarding Miss Devant's whereabouts. A reference to their few common friends in the country must of necessity involve delay, and every moment, he felt, was inestimably precious. It almost seemed as though he would have to acknowledge himself beaten.

Suddenly, as he thus chewed the cud of bitter reflections, there came to him guidance from an unexpected source in the shape of a bustling young woman who, entering rapidly after a perfunctory knock, gave a low exclamation of startled surprise as the receding smokewreaths showed the figure in the armchair to be not her brother but a distinguished stranger with dark hair slightly sprinkled with grey.

'I beg your pardon,' she explained.
'I thought my brother was here. I imagined you were he for a moment. Is he in? I suppose you have come to see him.'

'It is I that should beg your pardon for having startled you,' returned Heriot rising. 'Yes, your brother is in; he has gone upstairs for a moment to get me an address.'

'Oh, that's all right. I suppose he will be back again directly,' said Gertrude. 'I must apologise,' she went on, 'for rushing in so unceremoniously, but I'm so busy just at present that I find not a moment to spare for formalities.'

'Ah,' observed Heriot, 'it seems to me that everybody is horribly busy in England. You are no exception, I can assure you.' 'Oh, but I'm extra busy just now getting ready for a wedding, you see. I'm bridesmaid, you know, and really with one thing and another I don't know which way to turn.'

'Bridesmaid! Ah, Miss Dudley-Devant's wedding, I suppose,' said Heriot, tossing the end of his cigarette into the fire and facing Gertrude with his hands behind his back. The idea came to him with a flash of inspiration.

'Yes,' returned Gertrude, 'I suppose you——' and then a sudden perception of who the visitor was and what his presence at this eventful epoch might mean swept over her, and she stopped short with a very near approach to a gasp.

'To be sure,' exclaimed Heriot, pursuing his advantage with airy grace, 'I know her well; I may say very well. In fact, curiously enough, one of the reasons I came here for was to find out her address in town in order to present

my congratulations. Can you by any chance tell me where she is stopping now?'

'Number eleven Roxburghe Gardens,' replied Gertrude glibly. She did not stop to consider what the result of the disclosure might be. She mentally compared the tall well-looking man who stood before her with the misbegotten puppy to whom Millicent was doomed to be united, and resolved that, come what would, it should not be her fault if her friend had not a full and free choice given her, were it at the eleventh hour. She even went so far as to add gratuitously: 'I am going to meet her directly after lunch at the corner of Oxford Street and Bond Street for some shopping.'

'Many thanks,' exclaimed Heriot.
'I shall not forget the address.'

He was not likely to forget it. He had got what he wanted, but only just in time. A moment later, before the

words had died away from the speaker's lips, Waring appeared, full of apologies at having been away so long, but with the naturalist's address, which Heriot made some show of taking down in his pocket-book, though any one who had looked over his shoulder while he wrote would have made the discovery that the address noted was not the one that Waring had just read out to him, but another in Roxburghe Gardens.

'I'm sure I'm very much obliged,' he exclaimed, shutting his note-book with a snap when he had written what he wanted. 'It will probably save me a deal of trouble,' and for the rest of his stay he made no secret to Waring of the fact that he was on very much better terms with himself than he had been ten minutes before. He did not, however, stop long, for very soon after Gertrude had gone upstairs, wondering, with a delightful sense of guilt, what was to come of all this, he rose to

go, refusing Waring's invitation to lunch on the ground that he had an important engagement immediately after that meal, some little distance away.

'By the way, will you dine with me at the Criterion to-morrow at half-past seven, old man?' he said with his hand on Waring's shoulder as he took his leave. 'I want to see something of you.'

And Waring said 'Yes,' though, if the truth be told, he was not particularly anxious to go. Heriot's overtures were friendly, almost affectionate, but Waring was not sure enough, even yet, of the Forest-Officer's intentions to feel very desirous for much of his company. He almost wished he had given him Millicent's address. It might have saved him a deal of trouble.

## CHAPTER XX

'By the way,' said Waring, 'I have never yet asked you what the result of the trial was. What did they all get? I mean the beggars that were tried for Smart's murder.'

He was sitting opposite to Heriot at a small table in the Criterion Restaurant, sipping his coffee to the accompaniment of an excellent cigar, while assiduous waiters glided past his chair, and the unrestrained babel of the diners around him mingled with the clatter of their dining in his ears. The hour was nine, the concluding courses of an irreproachable meal had brought with them a serenely beatific frame of mind, and to the general feeling of placid content

induced by his dinner was added the pleasing sense of temptation successfully defied, which the sight of his silent but attentive host kept ever before him. Earlier in the evening he had been moved to wonder from time to time whether, after all, he had rightly interpreted Heriot's desire to get hold of Miss Devant's address, and whether, supposing he were mistaken, his own love-affair was going to be as simple a matter as it had promised to be the day before; and his wonder increased when, believing that the time for action must have passed, he had given Heriot what he thought would be a piece of news - namely, that Millicent was going to be married the next day, and had found his friend unfeignedly indifferent or at most regarding the information as food for smiling reflection. After dinner, however, there was no room in his mind for plaguy thoughts as to what Heriot still felt towards Ethel. He was now surer than ever that he had not been mistaken the day before as to Heriot's designs, and began to recognise that, in giving him so excellent a meal, his host was acting most nobly towards one whom he might well suspect of having helped to thwart them.

Heriot looked up from his plate at Waring's question. 'The case was finished after you left, was it?' said he. 'I had forgotten that. Well, they hadn't enough evidence for anything, so every one of the lot they arrested was discharged.'

- 'Couldn't they prove anything against the disappointed claimant—what's his name?—Maung Waik?'
- 'Absolutely nothing. His charming nephew tried hard to make out that the gun found on the *dacoit* who was shot was his uncle's, but he could get nobody to speak to it definitely, and our friend got off.'
- 'Do you think he really had nothing to do with it?'

- 'I doubt it. My own opinion is that the man whom the sentry shot, if not Bo Chet himself, was hiding in Maung Waik's house a good bit of the time we were in Thonzè, and that Maung Waik put them up to the job; but Mullintosh said that he could get no conclusive evidence to prove it. If they were there, they must have lain very low for the nephew to know nothing about it.'
- 'Could nothing be got out of the man who was shot?'
- 'They tried to pump him before he died,—trust Mullintosh to badger the poor beggar to the last,—but it was no good, as of course you heard. He would say nothing.'
- 'What did they give the policeman who shot him?'
- 'A first-class constableship and a reward—I'm not sure how much, but at any rate it was enough to allow of his giving a most gorgeous  $pw^{\hat{e}}$  at Thonzè.

The show came off the last day of the Sessions, and the first thing Maung Waik and party did on their release was to hurry off to the village, so as to be in time for it. I believe they were more exercised in their minds over the prospect of losing the fun there than over anything else connected with their imprisonment.'

- 'Well, it's a comfort they have got some change out of the gang. Poor old Smart! Have you wound up his affairs by this time?'
- 'Not quite, but very nearly. There are one or two things to do still, but they can keep till the end of the year when I go out again,—that's to say, if I do go out again. If not, I must ask you to do them.'
- 'If you do go out again! Is there any chance of your not going?'
- 'It's just possible that I may not; in fact, I may say it's very possible. It depends on circumstances. I had an uncle.'

'Oh!' said Waring and sat waiting, in case Heriot should think fit to explain this not over-lucid statement. He did not, however, deign to do so, but went on, as though desirous of avoiding an explanation. 'Which reminds me that I want you to do something for me, Waring.'

- 'And that is---'
- 'I suppose you will be seeing Miss Smart again before long.'
- 'I suppose so,' returned Waring, conscious of the faintest flush as he looked at his interlocutor.

Heriot drew a square, thickish packet from his pocket. 'I had hoped,' he said, tapping the table-cloth gently with it as he spoke, 'to go down myself to Crookholme and make this little parcel over to Miss Smart, but I am not at all sure now that I shall be able to do so before,—well, before you are able. I should particularly like to have it delivered personally, and what I want to

know is whether you will undertake postman's duty. It contains papers of Smart's which will certainly be of interest and may be of value to the Smart family. I have addressed the packet to Miss Smart, not being personally acquainted with her estimable father; but of course, if you take charge of it, you may use your discretion as to which member of the family it goes to. Would you care to make yourself responsible? Of course I should be obliged if you would. There is no hurry about it; any time will do. In any case there's a note for Miss Smart in the parcel which I should like her to have?

'I will take it to Miss Smart,' said Waring, holding out his hand for the packet. His heart gave a bound, for he believed that by this act Heriot intended to show once and for all that he had renounced all claim to be considered a claimant for Ethel's hand.

'Mind, I don't want it to be sent by post,' said Heriot, giving the packet to Waring.

'All right,' returned Waring; 'I will see that it is safely delivered.' Emboldened by this mark of confidence, he was about to ask Heriot what it was that made him think it very possible that he would not return to Burmah when his attention was diverted to the last of a party of three gilded youths in spotless raiment who had risen from a table some little distance from them, and were filing past the one at which he and Heriot sat. There was something familiar in the young man's features, and for a moment he wondered where it was that he had seen them before; then, as the object of his scrutiny turned a vacant glance towards him and the recognition became mutual, he exclaimed, 'Why, it's young Hexham!'

It was indeed young Hexham, not a little exhilarated by his dinner. 'Hullo,

Waring,' he cried, 'how are you, old chap? How's,—how's,—bridesmaid?'

The last word came out with an effort, which betokened that his tongue was proving itself even at this early stage of the evening an unruly member. The speaker came up to the table unsteadily and leant over the back of one of the unoccupied chairs. His round eyes were fixed and glassy, but the wine had loosened his tongue. He had been transformed suddenly, from the restless conciliatory youth Waring had seen a few days before, into a reckless, voluble, young debauchee.

'The bridesmaid is very well,' returned Waring shortly. 'You seem to be having a good time of it here, young man; making the most of your opportunities, I suppose.'

'Yes, going strong, thanks. Got couple o' chaps dining with me here to-night,—having final bust,—last day of bach—bachelorship, y' know—hood

I mean, not *ship*. I know,—I'm all right. I say, you chaps,' and he turned half round to where he imagined his brace of boon-companions would be, 'let me introduce you bride,—bridesmaid's,—brother,—hullo, where the devil have they gone to?'

The couple referred to had marched steadily on, without noticing that their host had stopped, till they reached the door, where they halted and began looking round the room with preternaturally solemn faces for their missing comrade.

'They are waiting for you,' said Waring, only thinking of how to get rid of the bridegroom elect with all expedition; 'we'd better not be keeping you. Good-bye; I shall see you to-morrow.'

'Oh, they're all right,' returned Hexham nonchalantly. 'They'll find their way to the Empire right enough by themselves. You chaps come too. Have

a drink though first—must have a drink—last day of bach—bach—can't get my tongue round these beastly words, but you know well enough what I mean, don't you? He sank into the chair he was leaning on and, resting his elbows on the table and his chin on his hands, looked at Waring, and then away from Waring to Heriot. 'Introduce me friend,' he said, turning suddenly to Waring. 'Friend must have drink too.'

Waring gazed in desperation towards the door, but Hexham's associates had vanished. It looked as if they were going to be saddled with this strayed reveller for the night. 'This is Mr. Heriot,' he said. 'I daresay you may have heard about him.'

'Heriot! I should think so,' ejaculated Hexham. 'Pleased—meet you, Heriot—most pleased,' and he leant over the table and shook the Forest-Officer effusively by the hand. 'En-

gaged Mil — Millicent once upon a time; I know all 'bout you.'

Waring was by this time so used to Heriot's doing exactly the reverse of what anybody else would do that he was hardly surprised when his companion returned Hexham's salutation with apparent fervour, saying with thinly veiled sarcasm, 'Ah, this is indeed an unexpected honour.'

'That's right,' exclaimed Hexham. 'No ill-will—that's right. Never do to bear will—ill-will.' For a moment he seemed to be trying to collect his thoughts and sat silent with his face in his hands, then looking up at Heriot he continued: 'All same you're precious fool—chuck that girl over. Simple ripper, I can tell you. Going to t'morrow her to-m—marry her t'morrow, I should say. Not t'morrow yet, I suppose,' and he plucked a watch from his pocket and gazed at it with lack-lustre eye.

'Ah, then I must congratulate you,' replied Heriot in the same calm voice, while Waring hurriedly interposed with, 'I say, Hexham, those fellows will be waiting for you.'

But Hexham was recalcitrant. He sat for some time glaring emptily in front of him, and then, 'I'm not going without you two chaps,' he asserted stoutly. 'Told you already those other chaps all right. Both as drunk as can be, but quite able look after themselves; find 'em at the Empire or somewhere. We'll go after 'em directly, but must have a drink with Heriot first, to show no ill-will.'

He seemed to have conceived a sudden affection for Heriot (who in a moment entered into the spirit of the comedy), and would not quit the table till he had extorted a promise from them both to come with him and have a drink below, and when they had left the restaurant clung lovingly to the Forest-Officer's

arm, while the latter piloted him out into the open and across the road to the nearest music-hall in the expectation of being able there to make him over to his guests. But the wandering pair were not there, and, once inside, Hexham insisted on stopping to see a portion of the entertainment and drinking whisky and soda-water with his companions to an extent which rendered his condition more distressing than ever. Waring had scant pity for the young fool whom fate had chosen to inflict upon him; but as the evening slipped on and Heriot plied Hexham ever more and more with liquor and made himself ever more and more agreeable, he tried to interpose, though in vain. An adjournment to another place of entertainment in search of the missing couple was proposed by Hexham and acquiesced in by Heriot. Waring demurred, and hinted at its being time for all concerned to go home, but a whisper from Heriot,

— Stop a bit and see me through with him; he won't be long now'---prevailed on him to remain and watch the affair out, as much in Hexham's interests as in those of his elder companion. attempt to run the lost ones to earth at another music-hall (for which Hexham asserted roundly that they had arranged to take tickets) bore no fruit; but the complacent youth was little moved at the poor success of the search, and again sought consolation in the flowing bowl with such assiduity that towards the end he threatened to become uproarious, and Waring had a vision, as the audience streamed out of the building at the close of the performance, of his being with difficulty restrained by Heriot from violently avenging some imaginary insult on a cheerful individual with a red face and a powerful command of the vernacular. They took the bridegroom elect between them when they were in the street, and having, after

much argument, persuaded him that there was nothing more to see, and that, all things considered, he might do worse than go to bed, prevailed on him to walk with them to the address in Jermyn Street he gave, instead of, as he wished, traversing the couple of hundred yards or so to the spot in a hansom.

'You'll come in and have a drink lots of stuff upstairs,' he said thickly, as they stood together opposite the house, and when they both declined, he exclaimed: 'P'raps you're right—won't do—mustn't do—drink too much jus' before wedding. Is it t'morrow yet?'

Heriot referred to his watch and assured him that the eventful day had arrived.

'Well, see you t'morrow—no, not t'morrow—t'morrow morning I mean. Don't f'get bring bridesmaid, Waring. You too, Heriot, old man, must come, y' know, f'rold sake's sake.'

'I'm afraid I can't,' said Heriot. 'I

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leave town to-morrow, — to-day, I mean.'

'Put it off, put it off,' urged Hexham. 'Must come t'wedding—shan't go upstairs till you say you're coming t'wedding.'

But Heriot was firm, turning a deaf ear to the young Bacchanalian's assertion that he must still bear a grudge against him if he would not come to see him married; and the bridegroom, finding that blandishment and obloquy were alike of no avail, staggered up the steps and disappeared through the door, showering benedictions on his two guardians as he went.

The two guardians turned slowly away when the door had shut behind Hexham and passed without a word into a quiet street leading towards Charing Cross. As they paced together over the pavement Waring was reminded irresistibly of the evening when Heriot and he had walked together from the

Tatkin mess to dine with the Smarts. It was a balmy night. The moon hung motionless amid fleecy clouds overhead, and the distant whirr of traffic on the still crowded thoroughfares behind them seemed a kind of urban parody of the cicada's ceaseless note.

'To think that that young sweep is to marry Miss Devant in a few hours' time,' cried Waring impatiently. He was angry with himself now for having refused to give Heriot the information which might have saved Millicent, and with Heriot for bowing so readily and with so good a grace to the tide of circumstance. 'I'm precious sorry for the girl.'

Heriot made no comment on this outburst, but gave a sigh, whether of despondency or of relief at having rid himself of Hexham, Waring could not say. They walked silently on till they reached the corner of the street and were aware of a belated hansom bearing steadily down upon them. Waring

signed to the driver, and the vehicle drew up on the roadway opposite them. 'Good-night,'he said abruptly to Heriot. 'I think I shall drive home.' He felt he could not say more at the moment, but he shook his friend's hand with a grasp that spoke volumes.

'Good-night,' said Heriot automatically, and as Waring stood with one foot on the step of the hansom about to get in he added, 'I think you will find that she is not so very much to be pitied after all.'

An hour later Waring was in bed, in his dreams delivering and again and again re-delivering a shadowy packet at a certain white-walled country rectory; but for Heriot there was no sleep that night. He walked slowly back to his hotel, changed his dress-clothes for a sober suit of grey, and till daybreak was occupied in his bedroom in writing and packing his bag. Early dawn found

him shaved, alert, and unwearied, with a formidable pile of letters on his table as evidence of his labours, and soon after sunrise he strolled across Charing Cross Bridge towards Waterloo, his footsteps ringing clear in the empty morning air as he paced along the silent footway. Arrived at the labyrinthine South-Western terminus, where his bag was consigned to the custody of a yawning porter, he made his way to the bookingoffice, demanded a ticket,-on second thoughts, two tickets,—to Ventnor, pocketed them, and took up his position at the steps outside where the vehicles for the main line drive up to deposit their passengers, waiting, with his customary solace between his lips, for some one to arrive. He had to renew this solace several times, for none of the cabs that drove up to the steps during the next hour brought any interest for him, and as the minutes slipped by his equanimity seemed to filter away. He

began to show signs of impatience, took to striding firmly up and down, referred several times to his watch, the hands of which were creeping on towards halfpast six, and at last, as though despairing of the arrival of the person he was expecting, turned in through the booking-office on the main-line platform, there to make the discovery that other and wiser people have in their day made, that Waterloo is of all Metropolitan stations the most fatal for making appointments at. He had not stood looking about him for more than ten seconds before a thickly veiled figure in a long dark cloak moved shyly forward, and a moment later there was a glance of mutual recognition.

He raised his hat. 'How long have you been here?' he asked.

- 'About a quarter of an hour,' was the reply. 'I've been looking about everywhere for you.'
  - 'I was outside there,' he said. 'I

thought you would drive up at those steps. I was afraid you hadn't been able to pull it off after all.'

'I didn't come that way; they brought me in to quite a different part of the station.'

'Ah, that's because you didn't tell them the main line. Well, never mind, better late than never. You have five minutes yet before the train starts. I've got your ticket. Is that bag all you've brought?'

'That's all; I had no time to collect more things. It was terribly risky. I don't know now how I managed to slip away without the servants hearing me. I'm sure the banging of the front door behind me must have disturbed some of them, and I had ever so far to walk before I could get a cab.'

'I ought to have met you at the house,' he said. 'Have you had anything to eat?'

'No. I should have got something

at the refreshment-room, if I hadn't been afraid of missing you. I should like something.' There was a sound of tears in the voice behind the veil, and a white ungloved hand fumbled nervously with a pocket-handkerchief.

'All right, I'll get you something,' he exclaimed. 'This is your train and here's your ticket. If you get into the carriage I'll fetch you some tea or something. Don't bother about the bag; I'll see about that when I come back.'

She was seated in a first-class compartment when he returned to her with a cup of coffee and a roll, which he watched her consume, standing at the carriage-door. 'You're better now, aren't you?' he said tenderly, when she had finished the coffee and was drawing the veil down over her face again. 'No need to keep that veil down,' he added. 'It makes you look terribly funereal with that cloak; they

will be putting you out at Brookwood if you don't take care.'

She smiled a weary smile at this sally. 'I'm bright enough underneath,' she said, drawing up her cloak a few inches and displaying a hand's-breadth of the brightest of skirts below its lower edge.

'By Jove you are, and no mistake!' he ejaculated. 'What dress is that?

It's surely not your——'

'Yes, it's my going-away dress. It's sweet, isn't it?' And, as though revived by the coffee, she regarded it pensively. 'Gertude Waring helped me choose it. It was the only thing I had to put on; there was nothing but it and my wedding-dress in the room with me. I couldn't get at anything else without disturbing mother. She was sleeping next door, you know. It seems wrong, doesn't it? But of course there was nothing else to be done. I couldn't wear my wedding-dress.'

Heriot chuckled softly to himself and drew up the cloak so as to have a more unimpeded view of the glories of the skirt. 'Of course there was nothing else to be done,' he said. 'By the bye, Millicent,' he added, looking up suddenly, 'that reminds me; I've just left a friend of yours,—well, not just; it's several hours ago now, but it seems only a few minutes.'

- 'Who? Where? Mr. Waring, I suppose. You were dining with him last night, weren't you?'
- 'Yes, but I don't mean him. Somebody a good deal more interested in you than Waring.'
  - 'Not Freddy Hexham, surely!'
  - 'The very same.'
  - 'Oh, Jack! Where?
  - 'At the Criterion.'
- 'Was he dining there? He didn't tell me.'
  - 'I should think he was,'
  - 'Did he see you?'

- 'Yes.'
- 'And speak to you?'
- 'Of course.'
- 'And knew who you were?'
- 'To be sure. Who was I that I should wish to conceal my identity? Really, Millicent, I must commiserate you on having lost such a jewel. Such spirits! such a flow of language! and so passionately devoted to your humble servant! He was quite unhappy because I said I couldn't come to his wedding,—going to be married to-day, if you please! Honestly now, Millicent, have you really considered all you are giving up for me? Think it over now, and if you still——'
- 'Don't, please don't! Did he really talk so much? I suppose then, that he was——'
- 'Delightfully so! Don't blame him; in that particular state he is really fascinating—one in a million.'
  - 'Please don't talk about him,' cried

the girl with a shudder. 'He had no suspicion of what we were going to do, had he?'

- 'Bless his innocent heart, no; not a shadow. If you had seen his effusive affection for me you wouldn't ask that question.'
- 'One never knows. Do you know, when I did sleep last night I did nothing but dream he was coming after me? Jack, I'm frightened to go down by myself! Can't you come with me?'
  - 'Impossible.'
- 'Do you think so really? Of course you know best; but it does seem to me that there would be no harm in your coming too,—in another carriage,—can't you?'
- 'Quite out of the question. It would never do; it would look exactly like that most improper thing, an elopement, and you know I wish to avoid all occasion for a scandal. We must go down separately. Keep your heart up;

you will be home by noon. I have lots to do in town before I follow you.'

'Very well; I'll do as you wish. You'll telegraph to Father to say I'm coming, won't you? And you'll let Mother know where I am; I don't want her to imagine all kinds of things. I ought to have left a note to say where I was going, only I hadn't time.'

'I'll see to that. I'll write a note at the hotel and take it round myself to Roxburghe Gardens. There will be time to do that before my train——'

'What is it?' she asked, clutching the arm that rested on the carriagewindow. He had stopped and was gazing down the platform at something she could not see from where she sat.

'Nothing,' he said, turning an impassive face towards her. 'You needn't be frightened. Your train ought to be off by this time,' he continued, after a pause of a brief duration which he occupied in tapping the pavement nerv-

ously with his foot. 'You're overdue; I never saw anything like this line for unpunc—ah! there's the whistle, good, you're off now! Au revoir; be brave, I shall see you this afternoon.'

- 'George!' exclaimed an individual in green corduroy and a scarlet necktie to a comrade, as the train snorted out of the station. 'S'welp me, George! that chap's missed 'is train after all.' At this early hour business was slack and the porters had ample time to take an intelligent interest in their surroundings.
- 'Who?' enquired George, stopping in his manipulation of a milk-can to gaze in the direction of the first speaker's eyes. 'What chap?'
- 'Im in a grey suit with a cigarette out yonder under the clock. 'Im as was talkin' to that girl and brought 'er a cup of tea just now.'
- 'Missed 'is train,' was the scornful rejoinder, 'plucky lot of trains 'e's

missed! 'E wouldn't be walkin' away so peaceful if 'e'd missed 'is train. 'E was seeing 'er off, that's all.'

- 'What did 'e buy two tickets for then?'
  - 'Did 'e buy two? Never!'
- 'Straight, 'e did; I see 'im at the bookin'-office with two; and just now he took two tickets out of 'is pocket, and give the girl one, and put back the other.'
- 'P'raps the other was for the old girl 'e's talkin' to now,' hazarded George. 'That's what it is. There, d'yer see 'er, just by the cloak-room? Fat old thing, only just come up, might be the mother of the girl 'e's just seen off. She don't like losin' trains any way. Lor', ain't she givin' it 'im 'ot! Just as though it was 'is fault she come too late. Just like a woman! Not that 'e minds, though; takes it calm and sweet enough, don't 'e? Take a lot to ruffle that bloke, I'll lay. Come along, 'ere's the six thirty-three.'

## CHAPTER XXI

IT was the end of May, the season when the horse-chestnuts at Crookholme were laden to their heaviest with blossom. The tree which decked one corner of the rectory's sloping lawn, near the confines of the orchard, had broidered its robe of soft bright green with a pattern of purest white spikes, and stood bearing more vivid testimony to the power of summer's breath than even the noble beeches, or the limes that fringed the road above the front gate. Ethel was wandering slowly up and down where the shadows cast by the afternoon sun chequered grass and gravel. She held a branch of horse-chestnut in her hand, a half-dozen or so of tender

wrinkled leaves surmounted by a delicate cone of flowers, but she was not looking at the spoil she had just gathered on tiptoe from the drooping boughs. She was in the rapt ecstacy of a summer daydream, and had yielded herself entirely to the lulling influence of her surroundings. The warm air, the patches of light and shade carpeting the path on which her eyes were bent, the hum of insect life around, had transported her in imagination to the East, and she was wandering once more in the cool depths of a Burmese forest, and hearing again the clear far-off cry of beast and bird re-echo through its leafy vaults, while some one paced by her side who in times gone by had with her listened to the sounds which fancy now bore to The click of the white her ears. garden-gate merged for the moment with the voices of the jungle and found a harmonious interpretation in her brain; and it was not till the latch swung back

with an answering snap that she raised her eyes to see, approaching her along the drive, a figure that was in a measure in keeping with her inward vision. It was not he who had been stepping with her through the forest of her dream, but one who might and, she instinctively felt, would give her news of him.

Waring's quick eyes had sighted her even before she looked up. He walked past the front-door to where she came slowly forward to meet him.

- 'Father and Mother are out,' she said, after the first words of greeting had been spoken; 'but Father will be back in time for tea, I know. You will stop and see him, won't you?'
- 'I should like to, if I may. Isn't it a grand day?'
- 'Exquisite; it reminds me of the day we met last.'
- 'Yes, that was a nice day, too, wasn't it? I was half afraid that on such a fine afternoon you would be out. I've

been wanting to come down to see you for some time past, but what with one thing and another it has been impossible till to-day. What a lovely bit of horse-chestnut!'

- 'Isn't it?' and she held it out for examination.
- 'I've seldom seen such a fine head of blossoms,' he exclaimed; 'it's perfect. Yes,' he resumed, handing the branch back, 'I've been meaning to pay you a visit for the last week or more; I've been asked to give you something.'
  - 'Indeed,' she said; 'what is that?'
- 'A letter,' he replied, producing the packet Heriot had made over to him at the Criterion.

She was standing facing him, shading her eyes from the glare with the feathery bunch she held. He looked into her eyes as she reached out her hand for the packet, wondering whether she had any suspicion of the course events had taken since he had last seen her, and, if not, how she would receive the news he would have to give her.

'Why, what a thick letter!' she exclaimed, as she took the packet from his hand and turned it over. 'It looks most formidable. It is very good of you, though, to have brought it. Who is it from?'

'From Mr. Heriot.'

Her eyes lightened. Her instinct had not failed her; he had come with a message from the person of whom her thoughts had been so full but a minute or two before. 'What, he has arrived then!' she exclaimed. 'I thought he must have; how long has he been at home?'

- 'Nearly three weeks now.'
- 'Three weeks!' Her face clouded slowly.
- 'Yes. He hasn't written to you yet then?'
  - 'No. Isn't this letter——'

'It was given to me some time ago, shortly after he arrived.'

The cloud thickened, and Ethel reddened with a sudden access of irritation. 'That is a long time ago,' she said in a low voice, looking hard at the letter. She was wondering what could have induced Waring to keep the missive back so long. It might perhaps have explained the writer's long unaccountable silence; there might have been an answer required. It was most inconsiderate of the bearer to detain it—more than inconsiderate—cruel! She was about to tear the envelope open, regardless of her visitor's presence, when his voice arrested her.

'It contains papers of your brother's,' he said, divining the cause of her discomposure. 'I was specially asked to deliver it personally, or of course I should have sent it by post. There is a note for you, but Mr. Heriot said there was no hurry, so I don't think it can have

given any news or required any answer. Any news that it gives must be unimportant.'

- 'Why?' she asked. The glow had not yet died away from her cheeks.
- 'Comparatively unimportant, I should have said. What I mean is that the most important thing that has happened to him lately has happened since he gave me the letter to give to you.'
- 'Happened! What has happened to him?' Her voice was almost fierce. The flush had faded and she fronted him, pale and apprehensive.
- 'He is married,' he replied with deliberation, as a leaden weight settled heavily on his heart at the sight of her anxious look.

She gave a little gasp, but said nothing for a brief space. She picked off one of the chestnut-leaves from the stem, and in the silence that succeeded Waring's words she began to pull it mechanically to pieces, dragging out the green tissue from between the ribs till it hung, a limp, drooping skeleton in her trembling hand.

- 'Not to Miss Dudley-Devant?' she murmured, when she had gained partial control over her voice.
  - 'Yes.'
- 'Wasn't the engagement really broken off?'
  - 'Yes.'
- 'Then wasn't she really engaged to the other man?'
- 'She was, but she thought better of it at the last moment when Mr. Heriot arrived from Burmah.'
- 'How long before the wedding was that? They were to have been married a few days after I saw you last.' It was almost as though she believed that there must be some terrible mistake, that she had not heard the news he brought aright.
- 'She seems to have made up her mind the night before the wedding, for

she left town early on the morning of the wedding-day,' said Waring, determined that she should hear all he had to say simply and directly. 'My sister got a frantic letter from Mrs. Devant the first thing that morning; she thought at first that her daughter had run off with Mr. Heriot.'

'Hadn't she?'

'No. She found when she went to Waterloo (where she met Heriot) that Miss Devant had only gone down to her father at Ventnor; he followed her by a later train. From there she wrote to her mother to say that she was not going to look at Mr. Hexham under any conditions, and was determined to marry Heriot or nobody, and, as he was close at hand to back her up, and she had got her father to her way of thinking, the mother had to give in. I believe she came round willingly enough in the end, for Heriot has had some money left him

by an uncle and is now moderately well off.'

There was a long silence, and then she looked up. 'You say he has been in England three weeks,' she said.

- 'About that. He came round to see me the day after you were up in town and told me that he had just arrived. He seems to have got Miss Devant's address from my sister, and to have met her the same day.'
- 'Your sister!' exclaimed Ethel. 'So she told him, did she? When were they married?'
  - 'The day before yesterday.'
  - 'Did you go to the wedding?'
- 'No,' said Waring, missing the object of her question, and imagining that she only wished to be definitely assured that the wedding had taken place; 'no, but we heard about it yesterday. It was at Ventnor, a very quiet affair; my sister was asked to go, but could not manage it.'

'I suppose they were deeply grateful to you and your sister,' said Ethel bitterly; 'it was most considerate of you bringing them together again.'

She broke off and set to work rending another leaf to fragments, while Waring watched her with a dull sense of dismay. He saw now, as clearly as though she had told him in so many words, that Ethel had up to that moment cherished the fond hope that Heriot would in the end show that the devotion of times gone by had not been a semblance only and a hollow mockery. He had journeyed to Crookholme that day with but the dimmest conception of all that Heriot still was to Ethel, and this, not because he had forgotten how puissant the Forest-Officer's sway had been in the past, but because he had overrated Ethel's power of shaking off the spell; and thus he had entered the garden-gate, buoyed up by the hope of better days to come, and imagining

that, with Heriot's wedding, he had seen the last barrier between himself and the maiden of his choice swept away. Now, however, he perceived that all that his news had effected was to open a gulf between them which widened at every moment. Ethel's last words brought home to him, with a sting that made him wince, the knowledge that she suspected him of having helped to bring Heriot back to Millicent in the furtherance of his own ends, in the hope that he would, with his rival disposed of, have it all his own way at Crookholme. He longed to repudiate the unspoken charge: twice he opened his mouth to explain, and twice, as he remembered how nearly he had yielded to temptation, the words of vindication stuck in his throat; and in the end he stood on the gravel, dumb and sick at heart, with Ethel shredding leaves remorselessly opposite him.

It was a very perturbed couple that

the Rector, returning briskly from a walk, came upon round the corner a minute or two later.

'Ah, Waring!' he exclaimed cheerily as he approached, with hand outstretched in welcome. 'I'm very glad to see you. When did you arrive?'

'About five minutes ago.'

'Good, then you're not off yet. I'm sorry my wife is not here to receive you, but she'll be in soon, and you must stop and see her. I am going in half an hour or so to fetch her from a friend's, where she is having tea. We shall be back before supper, and I daresay Ethel will be able to amuse you till then. You must stay and have supper with us before you go.'

'Thanks, I'm afraid I cannot stop; I must be off again directly,' replied Waring, taking his cue from Ethel's face. 'There's a train at half-past five I want to catch.'

'What! and only arrived five minutes

ago! Do you know, my dear sir, that it's half-past four now. It's sheer non-sense. There's a capital train that will get you up to town before nine o'clock. Ethel, can't you persuade Mr. Waring to stay?'

'Won't you stop to supper, Mr. Waring?' said the obedient daughter; but the voice in which the invitation was offered was not such as to lead Waring to alter his determination of leaving the Rectory at the first opportunity, and he could only repeat earnestly, 'Thanks, I'm afraid I really can't.'

The Rector cast a rapid glance, first at one and then at the other of the young people, and his eyebrows went up, as we have seen them go up before, in mute surprise. For the two to have met after a fortnight's absence, and to have succeeded in quarrelling within the short space of five minutes, was a feat which altogether exceeded the reverend gentleman's power of com-

prehension. 'Well, you must come in now and have some tea at any rate,' he said, preceding them to the house. 'Ethel,' he added when they had reached the front door, 'will you run and tell them to have the pony-carriage ready at five o'clock? I can drop you close to the station, Waring, if you are set on going by that half-past five train. I shall be driving within a couple of hundred yards of the railway.'

Tea was a very solemn function. Neither Waring nor Ethel (the latter of whom lingered over the ordering of the pony-cart as long as she dared) spoke more than was absolutely necessary, and each rigorously avoided the eye of the other. The Rector, whose spirits were not easily damped, did his best to ignore the prevailing sense of depression and to infuse a little cheerfulness into the meal; but all his attempts to enliven his two companions and make them talk fell flat, and, after

a while, he was himself reduced to the briefest of commonplaces, and in the end to almost total silence. Ethel would eat nothing, and Waring merely made a pretence of consuming his bread and butter; and altogether there was a general feeling of tension relaxed when wheels sounded on the gravel outside and word was brought that the ponycarriage was at the door.

'Am I to give you a lift then, Waring?' asked Mr. Smart, finishing his second cup of tea with a gulp and rising with a deep breath of relief. 'Remember, you will not be taking me out of my way in the least.'

'Thanks, I will come with you if I may,' returned Waring. He would have given a good deal to be able to have a few minutes alone with Ethel before he started. He had had time to consider, and felt sure that a word or two would suffice to disabuse her of one at least of the delusions she was labour-

ing under with regard to him; but he did not see how he could well refuse the Rector's offer, nor was he in the least anxious to thrust more of his society on Ethel if it was to be against her will.

Mr. Smart jumped actively into the little, low pony-carriage, took the reins into his hand, and, while Waring bid good-bye to Ethel, turned his broad back on them both and occupied himself with an obviously unnecessary examination of the whip and harness. He was thinking how much better after all it would have been had he driven off alone.

'Good-bye, Miss Smart,' said Waring, holding out his hand. 'I am,—I am sorry if what I told you has upset you.' Immediately the words were out of his mouth he realised that they had only made matters worse than they were before.

'Oh, I'm not upset; it's nothing,' murmured Ethel, barely touching the proffered palm with her fingers. 'Good-bye; I hope you will remember me to your mother,—and sister.'

'You must come for a longer stay next time,' exclaimed the Rector, who had completed his scrutiny of the whip-lash, and was now making a last desperate effort to dissipate the gloom. 'Mustn't he, Ethel?' he added, turning to his daughter as Waring took his seat by his side.

'Yes,—next time,' said Ethel, gazing straight in front of her.

She watched the pony-cart jog with its occupants out through the front gate and round the corner. Then she turned her back on the porch and ran swiftly up the steep stairs, with Heriot's letter, still unopened, clutched tightly in her hand. Arrived in her bedroom at the top of the house she locked the door behind her, dropped into a chair by the dressing-table, and, resting her head on her hands, sought relief in a flood of bitter tears.

## CHAPTER XXII

GERTRUDE's first impulse, when she saw who it was that was bearing down upon her was to turn and flee, but the handle of the door was abominably stiff, and at the second fruitless effort she realised that it was too late for flight, and that she must resign herself to her fate.

She had sallied forth, alone, and in one of her oldest dresses, to do a little shopping on the day of her brother's second visit to Crookholme, setting her heart at ease with the assurance that at the hour of sundown she was certain not to meet any of her acquaintances bent on the same errand as herself. And so it came about that the only thing that may invariably be reckoned

upon as certain to happen, to wit, the unexpected, did that evening happen. She had stepped into a jeweller's in Oxford Street in the hope of being able to see something that would do as a present for her mother (whose birthday was near at hand), had found that the amiable individual presiding at her end of the shop could show her nothing that would suit, and was opening the door to go out again, when she observed a young man, who, at the further end of the establishment, had just received a small parcel from the hands of the obsequious manager, move rapidly and with an air of recognition towards her. A sense of vague apprehension thrilled her as she perceived that it was the rejected bridegroom; and a guilty recollection of what she had done to bring about his recent repulse making her, she knew not why, anticipate a scene, she mechanically dropped the doorhandle, feeling that, if anything was to

happen, it were best that it should happen in the shop and not in the street. She need, however, have had no misgivings. Hexham raised his hat with lamblike meekness when he reached the door, and his countenance betrayed no anger, nothing more than an inordinate sheepishness with which was combined an almost grotesque look of melancholy.

'How do you do, Miss Waring?' he said. 'I thought I recognised you. Funny that we should be shopping at the same time and at the same place. Nice shop this, isn't it? How are you?'

'I'm very well, thanks, Mr. Hexham.'

'Wish I was. I'm down in my luck, as you may imagine. Are you going?' for he saw that she had raised her hand again to the door.

'Yes, I must be getting home,' she answered. 'Good-bye.'

'May I walk home with you then a little way?' he said.

He spoke so wistfully that she had not the heart to refuse him, though she was still doubtful what might underlie this mild exterior. The door was flung open by the urbane shopman, who seemed clearly of opinion that Hexham was a customer deserving of some attention, and they left the shop together.

They walked for some little distance in silence, till they had got clear of the densest of the foot-traffic and had emerged upon a clearer track of pavement. Then Hexham broke out. 'Don't you think it was precious hard lines on me, Miss Waring?'

She did not reply at once. 'Perhaps,' she said at length, assuming that he referred to Miss Devant's treatment of him; 'but don't you think that it was better that she should know her own mind in time, than that she should have married you and repented when too late?'

'I don't know,' he replied despondently. He really did seem very sorry for

himself; his complexion looked pastier than ever against his red hair, and his round eyes had dark lines under them.

'Your being married to her would probably have made both your lives unhappy. You must remember that,' she went on, conscious that the comfort she tried to give him could at best be but slender.

'Oh, I know that well enough,' he answered. 'And after all, it isn't that so much: I am more or less reconciled to having to do without her; but it's the disgrace that I cannot stand. I was not such a fool, Miss Waring, but what I could see that she never cared for me much, though I always hoped she would get to like me more after we were married, for I did mean to be a good husband, 'pon my soul, I did. But what bowls me over is the beastly ignominy of the thing, and the hopeless kind of feeling I've got that I shall never get anybody to care for me now.'

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- 'Don't say that, Mr. Hexham,' exclaimed Gertrude, with a twinge almost of compassion for the dejected youth. 'I'm sure you must have lots of friends.'
- 'Not one, upon my soul,' returned the downcast Hexham. 'You're the first person that's given me a kind word these last ten days. It's awfully good of you to let me walk with you. You were her greatest friend, you know, and it comforts me even to look at somebody who was a friend of hers.'
- 'I'm glad I can do something to cheer you up,' she murmured, not knowing what else to say, and longing for an opportunity of cutting short this embarrassing interview.
- 'If it weren't for you,' he broke out after they had covered a few more yards in silence, 'I believe I should commit suicide. You've no idea how lonely I am.'
  - 'You mustn't talk nonsense, Mr.

Hexham,' exclaimed Gertrude with cheery emphasis. She was a little staggered by his last confession—though only so far as it concerned herself; she was not nervous about the young man. 'Of course you have got lots of friends,—you can be sure enough of that—friends who are as sorry to see you unhappy as I am. Now, I'm not going to take you out of your way any longer; you see, I turn up here. Please don't bother to see me the rest of the way home; the house is only a step from where we are now.'

They had halted near that popular trysting-place of Metropolitan wooers, the Marble Arch, and stood, facing each other, removed a few yards up a side street from the impetuous stream of pedestrians.

'Oh, don't go in yet,' pleaded Hexham eagerly. 'I am so precious low, and you're so bright and jolly and cheer a chap up so. Would you,— would you very much mind walking a little with me in the Park?'

- 'I couldn't possibly, Mr. Hexham. Good-bye; I really must be going home.'
- 'I wish you would come with me,' persisted the youth with an earnestness that surprised his hearer. 'It's a lovely evening; it would be a shame to go in now. Besides, there's something more I want to say. You've come along Oxford Street with me,' he added; 'why shouldn't you go a few yards into the Park with me?'

Gertrude stood irresolute, but for a second only. Hexham's last remark had appealed to her common-sense. It had always been her pride that she could afford, on good occasion, to ignore the ordinary conventions of society; and on this occasion it really seemed as though, by a kind word or two and a little humouring, she could help to cheer up this woebegone young man

whose misery, as she reflected, she had in a measure herself brought upon him. It was a duty she owed her conscience. 'Very well,' she said, 'for a few minutes then. But you must say what you want to quick.'

Hexham was right when he said that it was a beautiful evening. The day had been as balmy in London as at Crookholme. The sky smiled blue and cloudless above, and the sun was sinking slowly into a sea of dull orange mist over the housetops of Kensington. They entered the iron gates of the Park together, differing outwardly but little from the many furtive couples around them, and together paced slowly westward outside the fringes of the crowds that surrounded the Park orators, past the diverging of the ways, till they penetrated into a region where the sound of impassioned speech sounded faint in their ears.

'If you are so lonely, Mr. Hexham,'

exclaimed Gertrude when all around them was comparatively still, 'why don't you go down to your people in the Isle of Wight?'

'I've got no people down there,' he replied; 'only an old aunt or two. It would be worse down there than here, I assure you. Besides I shouldn't have you down there to cheer me up,' he added.

'Me! I'm sure I'm no great stand-by,' returned Gertrude, barely able to restrain a smile at the young man's last words, and they walked onwards in silence till they reached a seat under some trees, one of the seats that line the path running parallel to the Bayswater Road. Here Hexham said, 'Let us sit down; I want to show you something.'

She sank obedient on to the bench, determined to humour him to the utmost. He seated himself at her side, and drawing from his pocket a small parcel began to remove the white

tissue paper in which it was enveloped. Gertrude watched his movements with languid interest; she recognised the parcel as the one Hexham had received from the jeweller's hands a few minutes before.

The removal of the tissue paper disclosed a neat, dark morocco-leather case, which Hexham opened and handed to Gertrude. 'What do you think of it?' he said.

'It is perfect!' she exclaimed, roused out of herself, almost against her will, to undisguised admiration.

There was a diamond star in the case, a twelve-pointed star formed of brilliants of exquisite lustre, a quivering diagram of light on a background of dark blue velvet. As Gertrude held it up the facets caught the sunset glow and sparkled with minute pin-points of liquid fire. It almost dazzled her.

'It was for her,' he explained, taking the case passively back from her hands when she had gazed her fill at its contents. 'It was to have been ready the morning of the wedding; but I didn't go and fetch it that morning,—you know why. And now they won't take it back. I went just now to find out if they would, but they wouldn't.' He stopped and looked at the ornament critically at arms' length, with his head a little on one side, his red-rimmed eyes blinking in the blaze. Then he turned round on Gertrude. 'Two hundred and sixty quid seems a lot to chuck away on a bit of a thing like that, doesn't it?' he exclaimed.

- 'It does.'
- 'And it's all wasted now,—unless——'
  - 'Unless what?'
- 'Unless,—well, what else can I do with it?'
- 'I suppose you will marry some day, Mr. Hexham. The diamonds won't spoil by keeping.'

- 'You mean I could give them to my wife,—if I ever marry now.'
  - 'Exactly.'
  - 'And if I don't marry?'
- 'If you don't marry,—well—if you don't marry, I should give them to somebody else as a wedding-present. Let me have another look at them, please; thanks. Have you got a sister?'
  - 'No; why?'
- 'Any cousins, girls I mean, that you are very fond of and would like to give a really handsome present to?'
- 'Only one—and she's forty—and ugly, beastly ugly!—and married, and I'm not very fond of her.'
- 'Well, in that case I really don't know what you can do with them if they won't take them back. They are exquisite, far, far too good for an ordinary everyday wedding-present. You really must marry, Mr. Hexham, for the sake of the star, if for nothing else,' she added with a little laugh.

Hexham looked down and shuffled with his feet uneasily. 'Will you take the star, Miss Waring?' he muttered.

- 'I?' The offer almost took her breath away. The monosyllable was all that she was able to get out.
  - 'Yes, you.'
- 'I couldn't, Mr. Hexham. I'm,—I'm not going to be married.'
  - 'But will you take it all the same?'
- 'It's quite impossible.' She suddenly realised what she had brought upon herself,—for there was no mistaking his drift—and spoke with emphasis, for it was necessary that there should be absolutely no misunderstanding. 'It's quite impossible. You know I could only take it if,—well, if something happened that—'she closed the case with a snap and held it out to him—'that never will happen.'

But Hexham did not take the proffered case. He kicked for awhile with the toe of his patent-leather boot at an obdurate stone in the path at his feet. 'Why should it never happen, Miss Waring?' he exclaimed presently.

- 'Don't be foolish, Mr. Hexham,' cried the outspoken Gertrude. 'You ought to know as well as I do that it is quite out of the question. We are utterly unsuited to each other. Please take the case back.'
- 'Do you really think so?' he persisted.
- 'Of course I do. Come, Mr. Hexham, take this back, please.'
- 'I know what it is,' said Hexham sullenly. 'You have taken a prejudice against me because I made an ass of myself the day before the wedding. Your brother told you, I expect.'
- 'My brother told me nothing,' she answered shortly. Even in the midst of her anger at his importunity she was near smiling at the thought that he should imagine that it was one

single act of indiscretion that had turned the scale against him.

Her answer non-plussed Hexham for a moment, but he was not long in returning to the charge. 'Then why should you think we are unsuited?' he said.

She turned a freezing glance upon him. All pity for the young man's desolate plight had vanished in her amazement at his presumption. She saw that he needed an awakening of the roughest, and she determined that he should have one.

- 'You say we are unsuited, but surely we are as well suited as Miss Devant and I were,' he urged.
- 'No doubt,' she retorted, 'but I never thought you and Millicent were at all suited. Otherwise I should never have brought her and Mr. Heriot together again.'
  - 'You brought---'
- 'Certainly. I encouraged Mr. Heriot to make it up with Millicent.

If it hadn't been for me probably you would have been married to Millicent at this moment.' This was putting it a good deal more strongly than the facts warranted, but she was resolved that, so far as her share in what had happened was concerned, there should be no equivocation.

Hexham sat as one stunned for a moment, then, to Gertrude's amazement, he broke out again plaintively, 'I don't care, Miss Waring, if you will only—you said just now you were sorry to see me unhappy——'

'But you ought to care,' interposed Gertrude briskly, rising to her feet with a view to putting a stop to all further conversation. 'You cannot possibly think seriously of proposing to any one who has treated you as badly as I have, can you?'

'I suppose not,' murmured Hexham, 'if it's true; but I can't really believe——'

- 'I know, but you've got to believe. Good-bye; no, you really mustn't trouble to come with me; I can easily find my way home by myself.'
- 'Oh, Miss Waring, if you only knew how miserable,—how damned miserable and lonely I am, you would have pity, I'm sure you would,' exclaimed the unfortunate youth. He had risen with her and stood, still kicking at the same stone in the path, and then when she did not reply sank slowly on to the seat again.
- 'I'm afraid I can do nothing to make you less miserable and lonely,' she made answer after some time. A moment later with a more cheerful air she exclaimed: 'You must cheer up, Mr. Hexham; you'll soon find that it isn't so bad after all. Goodbye.'

And with these words she turned and marched steadily eastwards up the shaded walk, chafing and laughing with alternate breaths, leaving her companion speechless on the bench behind her. She dared not for some time turn and look back to see what he was doing, whether he were following her or not; but as she directed her steps towards a side gate by which to leave the Park she cast a fleeting glance in the direction from which she had come. Hexham still sat on the seat, a comically pathetic figure, drooping like a wounded lily on its stalk. He had not moved since she had left him.

There was a telegraph-boy on the doorstep as she reached her mother's house, with a telegram for Mrs. Waring, and a desire to know whether he was to wait for an answer or not.

'Is Mrs. Waring in?' she asked the maid in the hall, and on learning that her mother was in the drawingroom, she mounted the stairs with the message.

'Mother, here's a telegram for you,' she said as she entered, and as Mrs. Waring, who was advanced enough in years to have a wholesome old-world dread of telegrams, put on her spectacles tremblingly, she added in a reassuring voice: 'It's most likely from Rupert at Crookholme to say that he is coming up by a later train than he intended.'

She was partly right in her conjecture, but only partly. The telegram was from Crookholme, it is true, but it was not from Waring.

## CHAPTER XXIII

ETHEL's was a strange mixture of sensations. Disappointment and anger strove for the mastery in her mind, and for a moment the fierier, more peremptory feeling prevailed. She was angry, passionately angry with Heriot for having played with her so long and so dexterously, only to toss her aside, like a broken toy, when all need of her had gone; and everything that he had said and done in the past came back to her now in the light of one long, studied insult. But fiercer even than her resentment towards Heriot, because more directly the outcome of what she had just seen and heard, was her wrath at the part Waring had taken in humbling her. It was incredibly mean of him, she thought, to have conspired to draw Heriot away from her, for in her blind indignation she did not doubt that it was he, and not his sister, who had arranged that Millicent should meet her old lover before it was too late; but what roused her passion to the highest pitch was the thought that, in stooping to such a petty scheme, he had been egged on by the presumptuous hope of himself stepping later into the Forest-Officer's shoes. And as if that were not enough, he must now heap an Ossa of insult on a Pelion of injury - keeping the letter back so as to be able himself to bring the baleful news, gloating over her distress, hugging himself in the complacent belief that, before long, he would be called on to minister to her sorrow and kiss away the tears he had summoned to her eyes! If only his motives had been different, she might have found it possible, some day, to forgive even this wrong that he had done her; but as it was, she knew she could never pardon him. It was so unlike what she had expected of him. She had always believed him to be honest and upright, incapable of a base, underhand action; but she saw now that she had been mistaken. He was as unprincipled and self-seeking as the worst of them. It was very hard to bear,—but,—but she would have to bear it.

The first spasms of rebellious grief passed slowly away, and in a few minutes she raised her hot head from her hands with a sense of numbed despair and saw Heriot's letter, still unopened, lying on the dressing-table before her. And as she looked, across the blackness of her misery there struggled a faint flicker of curiosity, a desire to know what he had got to say for himself, why

he had chosen to make the missive over to Waring, how it was that he had not written to her before. It occurred to her that the letter itself might explain what had happened, and she yearned to lay hold on something that would throw light on the devastating facts and make them more comprehensible, and therefore easier to bear. Wearily she tore the envelope open and took out the contents. There was a thick bundle of papers inside, tied round with tape,bills, old letters, lists of effects, and the like—also a short note written on a separate sheet of paper, which she eagerly seized. It was headed Charing Cross Hotel, and ran as follows:-

DEAR MISS SMART—The address above will show you that I am back in England. I daresay by this time you will have learnt now I have been improving the shining hours since my arrival, and I hope you will congratulate me on having exhibited, for once, a moderate amount of zeal. I am sending you a batch of your brother's papers with this. The trusty Waring will, I expect, take it to you. The foolish

youth has been making a most misguided attempt to frustrate my little plans for the future; still, for all that, I have come to the conclusion that he is about the truest friend I have. I daresay there is some one else who has made the same discovery. I think this will be the last lot of business-papers that I shall trouble you with, but if there should be any other matter that requires settling, I shall see to it when my leave is up; or if, as is just possible, I do not go out again to Burmah, I feel sure that Mr. Waring will be only too glad to give it his best attention. To his good offices I commend you.—Sincerely yours,

John Heriot.

Heriot wrote a good hand, but her eyes were blurred with tears, and she had to read the letter through two or three times before she took it all in, and even then it brought no consolation. She had looked for him to give some explanation, some justification for having treated her so cavalierly. Surely all the close intimacy of the past entitled her to some such consideration. But neither explanation nor justification was there, nor the haziest sign of a feeling that either was called for. It

was as though he thought that what had happened was the most natural thing in the world. She did not consider, as she would have done in more rational moments, how difficult it would have been for him to make the blow lighter without humiliating her still more; she could only writhe impotently under the sting of his airy assumption that she could not have ventured to cherish any such hope as would have made this a blow for her or given her a claim to have it softened. And after all, perhaps it was better so; nothing could now avail to undo the past. He did not, apparently, expect her to want sympathy, and with a hardening of her heart she determined that she would do without it.

She read the letter through again slowly, this time with a steadier pulse and a new feeling in her breast, one of cold defiance. This re-perusal brought a fresh idea into prominence. It was

obvious that, whatever Waring had done, he had not brought about or even connived at the reconciliation between Heriot and Miss Devant. The 'plans for the future' which he had made 'a misguided attempt to frustrate' she felt sure could only be Heriot's intentions with regard to the bride-elect. He must, in some way or the other, have tried to prevent a renewal of the engagement. She saw now that she had accused him unjustly, and following on the full perception of the wrong she had done him, came, with a burning sense of shame, the thought that she might possibly have been crediting him all along with a stronger feeling towards herself than he had actually experienced. After all, when she came to consider, there was nothing, absolutely nothing to show conclusively that he had ever thought of proposing to her. His words on the morning of a notable day at Thonzè might, it is true, have been

construed into an indication of such a design; but had she been justified, she asked herself, in putting so extreme a construction on them? Might not her conceit have exaggerated a kindly, brotherly interest in her welfare into a tender regard. What right had she to assume that she was more to him than any other girl of his acquaintance, and how had she dared, a few minutes before, to think that he hoped to comfort her by his own faithfulness for Heriot's defection? That defection served, now that her wrath had cooled, to remind her, tragically enough, that she was not so indispensable to the happiness of her fellow-mortals as she had fondly imagined. She had been flattering herself that she was something to the man who from the beginning had looked upon her as the sport of an idle hour; was her judgment less likely to be fallible in Waring's case? The latter had probably acted throughout as

a friend, and nothing more; if she had not been so blind she would have seen that herself long ago. Others had been more discerning. She understood now what the writer meant by a passage in the letter that up till then had puzzled her. Who could say but what Waring was the truest friend that she too had ever had? And then, with a miserable sense of degradation, she realised that she had let this friend go in the belief that she loathed and mistrusted him,—that he had gone just when she could worst afford to lose him. One bereavement had followed close on another. Heriot's idol lay shattered at her feet, and it seemed as though there were nobody now to mourn with her over the fragments. Just when she most needed sympathy too! Poor girl! The outlook loomed black and solitary. Under the aching pressure of the double loss that she had sustained her sunny head dropped afresh

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over the dressing-table, and the bitter tears poured down again.

The rumbling of wheels on the drive below roused her. Had it been half an hour later she would have declared that it was the pony-carriage back again, for the sound the vehicle (whatever it was) made as it turned in at the front gate seemed familiar; but she knew that her father could not have had time to fetch her mother back. Still it might be somebody who would want to see her. sprang to her feet and hurriedly bathed her tear-stained face. She heard the front door open; a sound of distant voices was wafted up to her from below, and as she turned the lock and stepped on to the landing outside her bedroom she became conscious that one of the voices was her father's. It was the pony-carriage back after all. Why had it returned so soon? She stood on the landing

irresolute, anxious not to exhibit the tokens of her grief to the Rector's keen eye, yet at the same time feeling that something had happened that might require her presence below. As she wavered, with her hand on the balustrade, she heard the Rector calling to her to come down. The summons cut short her hesitation. She ran down the stairs.

The little hall seemed full of men,—men whom she knew from the village, six or seven it seemed to her. There was a laboured shuffling of feet and a confused murmur, above which Mr. Smart's voice sounded clear. 'Carefully there,' he was saying. 'Upstairs now. The room to the right at the end of the passage when you get to the top. Keep his head high.'

'What's the matter, Father?' she exclaimed, gazing down with startled eyes from where she had halted a few steps up the last flight.

'We've had a spill, and I'm afraid Waring is rather badly hurt, poor chap. I'm having him taken up into the spare room. Open the window there wide, will you, dear, and get some water and a sponge ready? They are going to put him on the bed.'

Rather badly hurt! She turned quickly and sped up the stairs again to her ministrations with a palpitating heart. The Rector's words, and the momentary glimpse she had had of the body that strong arms were carrying to the foot of the stairs, struck a chill of horror into her. There was neither water nor sponge in the spare room; she had to dart off to fetch both from her own, to find on her return that the villagers, whose aid the Rector had invoked, had already laid Waring on the bed. He was stretched on the counterpane insensible; his eyes were shut, his face, where it was not obscured by the blood which still

dribbled from a gash near the temple, was ashy white; but, in answer to the frightened, questioning look his daughter gave him, the Rector was able to say with cheery emphasis, 'No, it's all right, he's not dead,' and she felt the colour come back to her cheeks.

'How did it happen?' she asked her father in an awestruck voice when the blood had been washed from the senseless man's forehead and the wound temporarily bound up. The villagers had all gone below, and only the maid was with them at the bedside.

'Tommy took fright, — shied at something, a shadow or a leaf, I couldn't see what,—and upset the cart on to the side of the road. I can't make out how it was, but anyway over we went. I fell on to the grass and did not hurt myself in the least, but Waring was pitched on to a heap of stones; his feet somehow got entangled in the reins as he fell, and that seems

to have thrown him with greater force.

- 'Where was it that it happened?'
- 'Just beyond the pond, before we had got to the village; just where they have begun mending the road. It was all over in a second. Nothing else suffered, curiously enough; neither Tommy nor the cart is injured in the least, and Tommy is not even frightened. He came back as steadily as possible.'
- 'Poor man! Have you sent for Dr. Braham?'
- 'Not yet. After what has happened I couldn't trust any of the men to drive Tommy over and fetch him, but I'm going on now in the cart to call for Mother at the Wells's. Braham may possibly be having tea there; if not we can go on to his house and fetch him back with us; it will save time. Do you think you can look after him while I am gone? Perhaps you had better keep Mary up here.'

'No, Father, I'm not afraid. I can ring for Mary in a moment if I want any help; but I suppose we can do nothing much till Dr. Braham comes?'

'No. Let him have plenty of fresh air and keep his head cool; till Braham comes I don't see that anything else can be done. Poor boy, he looks in a bad way.'

He left the room, and Ethel heard him creaking briskly down the stairs and through the hall. At the front door he spoke for a moment to the men who had carried Waring upstairs, and then there was a clatter of heavy boots and the sound of the pony-cart moving away again down the drive. The servant lingered a few minutes to tidy the room; then she too slipped away to report progress in the kitchen, and Ethel was alone with Waring.

He lay motionless on the bed with his wan face turned up to the ceiling. The evening sun slanted in at the

window and lighted up the wall immediately above the pillow. She stood and watched him for a short space, then she walked softly to the window and looked out into the garden where the shadows were lengthening lazily away from the west. In the mulberry-tree, below where she stood, a thrush was piping its lustiest, and from the leafy summits of the elms came the solemn, husky caw of a colony of rooks; save for this the evening air was hushed and still, for such of the village-folk as the accident had attracted to the Rectory had by this time either dispersed or retired to the back premises. She stood awhile collecting her shattered senses and bathing her burning face in the cool, fragrant breeze; then with a deep breath she turned cautiously, as though the man on the bed were asleep and she were afraid of waking him, and stepping with noiseless footfall across the carpet, sat down in a chair by his

side, with her shadow brooding like a guardian spirit in the centre of the radiant patch of sunlight above his head.

How still he was! She watched him, half fascinated, for a minute or two to see if he gave any outward sign of life, but she could detect none. He was absolutely motionless; he seemed almost to have ceased breathing; it was as though he lay dead before her. a brief moment a great fear that he was really dead seized hold of her, and in its clutch her heart stood still. A closer look showed a fitful, feeble motion of the chest, and she drew back again reassured; but the transient horror had set in motion a current of ideas which up till then she had striven hard to keep from her. He was still living, but,suppose he were to,—yes, she must face the possibility,—suppose he were to die! She covered her eyes with her hands to shut out the sight of that still form on the bed and the memories that the vision would bring in its train, but the black thoughts thronged in unbidden nevertheless. Suppose he were to die—like Jack. How it all reminded her of her feelings at Jack's murder! She saw again the well-remembered dinner-table in the verandah of the rest-house at Thonzè, and in sharp succession the events of that awful night passed before her; her brother's careless, slighting speech, the sudden angry thought that leapt out in her mind at his words, the fatal rifleshot, the hard set look on the dead face, full (so it seemed to her) of dumb reproach for the resentment that had flamed within her, no fiercer than the resentment she had felt that day; and then came the memory of the bitter days that had followed, when the burden of her mourning was ever this, 'If only he could have lived to know that I was sorry,' and, haunted

by that grim, inexorable shadow of remorse, she had again and again wished that death would come and put an end to her agonies of selfreproach. They were a ghastly memory, those days that had succeeded her brother's death; she could hardly call them to mind even now without shuddering. And now, despite the thousand penitent resolves that they had wrung from her, it seemed as though exactly the same thing might happen again. Exactly the same! Who could tell but what Waring might not in his turn pass away, with the memory of her unjust anger on his face, never to know how keen, how passionate her repentance had been? Might not his life's sun go down upon her wrath in the same cruel way that Jack's had gone? She pressed her fingers tighter, but, white as the pillow it rested on, Waring's face rose ever before her eyes, recalling the

long drawn-out horrors of the past, and filling her with the grisliest of fore-bodings for the future. She could not bear it; it would kill her if the same thing happened again. Oh, if only it were not so like, so terribly like what had happened before!

There was a low groan from the bed. Ethel took it as an indication of dawning consciousness. She leant anxiously over the prostrate form and sponged the white forehead, waiting for a fresh sound or movement. She was determined that he should live to hear the outpourings of her contrition, to learn that she was not without gratitude. For a time, however, there was no other sign of animation. To make him more comfortable loosened the collar at his throat, undid another button or two of his waistcoat, and threw the flaps of his jacket farther back.

In doing so, she noticed on the bed

a small packet of papers which she remembered having seen her father take out of Waring's pocket in order to relieve his chest of all superfluous weight. She was about to place it on the table by the bed when something familiar in the handwriting on the uppermost of the papers caught her eye, and with a start she examined it closer. It was her own. Before she fully realised what she was doing she had swiftly scanned the five or six other papers in the bundle. Then she folded them together again with a glow, partly of shame for her own vulgar curiosity, partly from another feeling. They were all the same, all old letters of hers to Waring, little trivial notes, enquiries after his injured thumb, invitations to rides, the letter in which she had bid him good-bye before she left for England, those she had sent him from Yorkshire and Crookholme, all arranged in chronological order, with the date, where it was omitted, inserted in pencil. In a flash she recognised them all, though never till this moment had she realised that she had written so many. He seemed to have kept all that she had ever sent him.

If any one, a few hours earlier, had told Ethel in plain, bald, unvarnished terms that a young man of her acquaintance had been infatuated enough to treasure up all the letters that he had ever received from her, ephemeral or otherwise, and keep them in a pocket next his heart, the announcement would have struck no tender chord in her. The form that the young man's adoration had taken would have appeared to her as ludicrous and nothing more. But now the sight of those well-thumbed slips of paper, and the knowledge of what they must have meant to him who lay there white and still, hovering, for all she

knew, on the fringe of the shadow of death, thrilled her with a strange emotion in which pity seemed ready to merge by mysterious gradations into the higher, nobler passion to which it is eternally akin. She had not cast the memory of Heriot from her heart. The dominion of his personality was too strong to lose its power in a moment; but the fiery trial of the last hour had been slowly purging her disappointment of all that was passionate and unreasoning, and the soberer, thoughtfuller residue was for the time swallowed up in her vehement yearning for an opportunity of atoning for the wrong she had done to Waring, and in the great fear lest her repentance should have come too late.

The sunlight slipped up the wall above the bed and died softly away, and the summer twilight stole in through the windows of the room. The thrush in the mulberry-tree had

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ceased its song, but hard by a nightingale burst out into a sudden flood of melody that filled the air with sound. Ethel had no ears for the liquid notes; her thoughts were overwhelming her. Slowly she slipped from the chair in which she had been sitting watching her patient, and, dropping on her knees, buried her face in the pillow near Waring's head, and poured out her soul in a heart-broken prayer that he who had saved her life, who had loved her so long and so faithfully, might be spared, if for nothing else than to receive some sort of reparation at her hands.

## CHAPTER XXIV

Mrs. Waring arrived that same evening at Crookholme in obedience to the summons conveyed in the telegram she had received, and found her son conscious, though much shaken and weakened, for he had lain a long time insensible. He was not, however, so feeble but what he could give her a vivid enough account of the accident, and tell her that the doctor had said. after examining him, that he had sustained no serious injury, and that all he required now was perfect rest and quiet; and she was able to telegraph to Gertrude a reassuring summary of this verdict before bedtime. She slept one night only at the Rectory, for the next day found Waring, after a long dreamless night's rest, like a giant refreshed with wine, and she left again for town on the afternoon of that day, satisfied, from what she had seen, that her son was progressing under a care as tender and systematic as any he could receive at home.

- 'He won't be back in two or three days, my dear Mother,' said Gertrude oracularly, as Mrs. Waring, after describing how matters stood at Crookholme, expressed a confident hope that her son would be home within that time. 'We shall be lucky if we see him before the end of seven. Trust him to be as long as possible recovering! So you think he said nothing,—nothing,—interesting to her before the accident.'
- 'He would have told me if he had, I feel sure.'
- 'Well, I am surprised. I did really think he meant business; he was so terribly solemn and self-important

before he went down. But he would never have said anything to you if she had not accepted him. You don't think he can have proposed to her and been rejected, now? Did he look limp,—and crushed,—and shattered,—and,—well,—as a man looks who has just been refused? You know how they look.'

- 'Perhaps, though I don't know how you can know, dear. He was certainly limp,—very limp, but very happy, poor boy, quite in the seventh heaven, following her about with his eyes everywhere.'
  - 'And she was nice to him?'
- 'As nice as she could be; nothing was too good for him. She slaved for him, I assure you, day and night.'
- 'Was she very much cut up? I wish you were a little more communicative, Mother dear; I have to drag everything out of you.'

Mrs. Waring laughed. 'She seemed

terribly cut up,' she said; 'so were they all, of course, but she showed it most. I have seldom seen a girl so changed. Do you remember how bright and animated she was the other day when she was here? There she was as white as a sheet, and never smiled except at Rupert. She looked as if she had been crying her eyes out when I arrived.'

'That may have been remorse,' said the cold-blooded daughter; 'but no, I think it's a case. We shall not see him again till his fate is sealed. I will give him a week to make up his mind. That ought to be enough for anybody, but he is such a slow old boy!'

'My dear child, what curious ideas you seem to have about that sort of thing! Men always like to consider well before taking such an important step.'

'Always! I assure you, Mother,

you are wrong there. Some of them are uncommonly sharp in popping the question, some that you would never expect to have sense enough to make up their minds about anything in less than a fortnight. Now take off your bonnet, and let me carry it upstairs while you make the tea.'

'My dear Gertrude,' exclaimed Mrs. Waring, seating herself at the tea-table, 'one would imagine by the way you talk that you had been proposed to yourself.'

'And how do you know I have not been?' retorted Gertrude. 'Wait till I have put your bonnet away, and I will a tale unfold.'

Meanwhile Waring was, as his mother had remarked, revelling in a veritable seventh heaven. In his case this state took the form of a kind of Elysium, which, except in so far as it was conducted on strictly temperate

principles, might have been the ideal Moslem one, involving a good deal of repose on soft couches in a horizontal position, lapped in soft rural sounds, with a good many roses-red, white, and yellow-to minister to his senses of sight and smell, and a good deal of the company of at least one dark-eyed attendant houri, who, if she did not ply him with the beverage beloved of Omar Khayyam, yet saw that there was no lack at their proper seasons of barley-water and beef-tea. Gertrude had rightly surmised that the wish that was uppermost in his mind was that his injuries could have been (outwardly at least) severer, so that he might have a more valid excuse for lingering on in charge of his two assiduous nurses. And who could have blamed him for wishing to prolong the bliss, as full as it was unexpected, in which he lay and sunned himself? He could at first scarcely credit his senses when, after a

long, blank interval of darkness he came to himself, to find that he had awakened into a new bright world, that the face in which, when last he had seen it, he had read distrust and ill-disguised anger, shone now with radiant peace and a tenderness past belief. He could not understand how this had come about, and the more he thought, the firmer his conviction grew that after all it was better not to understand it. It was a long time before he could recall the events of the half-hour immediately preceding the accident; they did not, in fact, come back to him in all their fulness till the present, with its changed conditions, displayed them in the light of disagreeable facts that had better be forgotten as soon as possible; and it was a satisfaction to discover that for his poor puzzled brain it was infinitely easier to forget than to remember. Wherefore he was content to lie at his ease, to take things as they came unquestioningly, and to bask, so to speak, in the sunlight of his own happiness.

And Ethel? Reparation was all that occupied her mind; a desire to earn forgiveness for the injustice and blindness of the past was uppermost in her thoughts, and with it a hope that, in the active accomplishment of these aims, she would be mercifully enabled to forget her own suffering. And with this object in view she set herself to the task of tending the injured man, wearing herself to a shadow at his bedside, full of anxious solicitude for his welfare, thrilled with the keenest pleasure if she could anticipate the smallest of his wishes, till the longed-for, passionless calm enveloped her; and when she was roused from it, it was to find herself being drawn in mysterious wise closer and ever closer to the man who had done so much for her, whose love she was from a sense of duty trying to

repay, and to learn that it was daily becoming easier to conceive the possibility of rewarding that love in the only way he could ever really wish to have it rewarded. Truly that packet of old letters was beginning to do its work.

And so the days rolled on. On the fifth morning after the accident the doctor declared that there was no reason why his patient should not return to town, as he was quite fit to be moved, and reluctantly the patient made his preparations leaving the same afternoon. These consisted merely in packing the bag that his mother had sent down to him from London, and arranging for a fly to take him to the station (he had had enough of the pony-cart), and, as the latter duty was performed by Ethel, who also helped him to pack, on the ground that it was dangerous for him to stoop much, it cannot be said that his labours were very exhausting. Yet, when everything was ready, he was told that he must have tired himself and ought to have a good rest before he started for the train; and, ever obedient, he elected to take his rest in an easy-chair beneath one of the spreading beeches on the Rectory lawn. A balmy air was floating through the garden, and a myriad leaves bent and nodded to its caress with a silvery rustling murmur; the shrubbery hard by Waring's seat was all a-twitter with bird-life; the brown bees, humming as they sailed down the breeze, provided a mirthful background of sound, soft enough to lull the wakefullest to sleep; but there was no sleep for Waring, though he lay at his ease in outward conformity with his surroundings. The Rector had gone out to his parish-work in the village, and was to be at the station to say goodbye to his visitor; Mrs. Smart was lying with a nervous headache in her darkened bedroom, and Ethel was attending to her indoors. Waring therefore had a time to himself to lie and ruminate in.

What his thoughts were, as he lay stretched in the easy-chair, it is unnecessary to specify here in detail. Suffice it to say that they were merely a repetition of what had been filling his mind for the past five days, and that they were vividly and pleasantly embodied when the front door opened softly, and a vision in a large straw hat paced slowly up the lawn towards the beech-tree.

- 'Now, Mr. Waring, you are not to get up,' she exclaimed, as Waring on her approach dropped his long limbs and attempted to rise. 'Keep where you are, please. Look, I am quite comfortable in this chair.'
  - 'How is Mrs. Smart?' enquired

Waring, sinking back into his cushions.

- 'Sound asleep now, I am glad to say. If once she can get off to sleep she is all right, for when she wakes up the headache is gone.'
- 'I hope the noise of my fly won't disturb her. Perhaps it could wait outside the gate.'
- 'I don't think that is necessary, thanks. Her bedroom does not look out on to the front drive; besides, when once she is thoroughly asleep nothing disturbs her.'
- 'When does the train start exactly?' asked the convalescent.
- 'At 3.23; it isn't a quarter to three yet. The fly will be round directly, so, you see, you will have lots of time to get down to the station in.'

She leant back in her chair and gazed up into the piled wealth of greenery above her head. She was attired in a cool white dress, the very

one, if he remembered aright, that she had worn as she sat in the verandah of the rest-house after the morning's snipe-shooting at Thonzè. His eye wandered jealously over the soft curves outlined against the dark tree-stem, and, stretched at ease as he was, like a lazy lotus-eater, the strong man's heart was filled with an unutterable yearning to clasp the slim, white-robed figure to his heart and speak out all that was in his mind. But all he did was to draw his watch from his pocket and remark, in the most mundane of tones, 'Then I haven't very much more time; I must make the most of it.'

And he proceeded to make the most of it by flinging himself more luxuriously back in his chair and, to all appearances, giving himself over with half-closed eyes to a full enjoyment of the drowsy summer day.

'Did they give you a letter that

came for you by the mid-day post?' asked Ethel, after a pause.

'Yes, thanks,' returned Waring; it was from my sister. She had an idea I was not coming up till tomorrow, so she wrote to me to-day.'

'You would have done better to go up to-morrow,' observed Ethel. 'I don't quite like your going to-day, even though Dr. Braham says there is no danger of your being upset.'

'Oh, I am really quite well now,' declared Waring stoutly, 'thanks to you. I feel I ought to go; I have been nuisance enough as it is.'

'Now, Mr. Waring, you know you have been no nuisance at all. I'm sure a better patient never existed. But of course your mother and sister will be pining to see you. I hope they are well?'

'Quite, thanks; Gertrude tells me that she has had a letter from Mrs. Heriot.'

From where he lay he could just see her face, and he watched, as he spoke, narrowly, for he was anxious to know what effect the mention of Heriot's name would have upon his hostess. Three days before he would not have dared to utter it in her presence, but of late he had somehow begun to notice a change in Ethel which encouraged him to venture on the hitherto dangerous ground; and as now he looked he could see no shadow of emotion cross her face, and could detect no tremor in her voice as she replied: 'Indeed, and how are the happy couple getting on?'

He was quite right. There was a change in Ethel; she realised it herself now plainly enough. Four days before she had dreaded the mention of Heriot's name as she would have dreaded a spear-thrust, as something sharp, pitiless, stabbing. Four days before she had wondered when the

memory of Heriot would ever lose its fatal power of wounding. But now, —now it was not so difficult a matter after all to think with unquickened pulse of Millicent as Heriot's wife, to feel an interest in what she did, nay, even to smile and wish her well, with as much sincerity and fervour as when she imagined that she was going to marry Hexham. Much that is astonishing can happen in four days.

'I believe they are getting on capitally,' said Waring, cheered by the result of his scrutiny of Ethel's face; 'they seem to be enjoying their honeymoon. She gave me another rather interesting piece of news,' he went on. 'You remember Mr. Hexham, the man Miss Devant was engaged to?'

'I never saw him, but both you and she mentioned him. What of him?'

<sup>&#</sup>x27;He is engaged again.'

- 'What, already! To whom?'
- 'To a girl in the Isle of Wight. My sister does not mention her name, but says he has known her all his life. Gertrude seems much amused.'
- 'Fancy! he has not been long over it, has he?'
- 'I should think not. And what makes it more remarkable is that Gertrude says she knows, as a matter of fact, that he actually proposed to another girl before that. He was evidently determined to be married.'
- 'It seems so,' she murmured, almost to herself.

For some time they sat silent near each other, while the breeze laughed a leisurely, ceaseless laugh in the treetops above them, and the perfect peace of that summer's day crept softly into their hearts and brooded there. At length came a distant rumble on the quiet road outside, and the sound of a deliberate measured

trot, which approached nearer and nearer, and at last stopped in front of the garden-gate.

'Why, there's the fly,' exclaimed Ethel. 'Already! I didn't expect it for some little time yet. Well, it can wait. Don't hurry, Mr. Waring, you know it's bad for you. Come slowly down the lawn; the servants will be putting your bag in; there is lots of time.'

They made a pretty picture as they strolled soberly, side by side, across the flickering lights and shadows of the smooth green sward, and emerged on to the broad belt of sunshine by the carriage-drive. The fly was really unconscionably early, and, even after Waring's bag had been safely bestowed, Ethel declared that it was absurd to think of starting for the station for another quarter of an hour.

'In that case, may I take a turn through the garden?' said Waring.

'I don't think I've seen the orchard properly yet. It looks delightfully cool and shady in there under the trees.'

'Of course,' she made answer. 'I couldn't hear of your spending all that time in the waiting-room at the station. Come along; you'll be able to make yourself very comfortable in the shrubbery,—and, ah, that reminds me,—I must get you some flowers to take up to town with you. It would never do for you to go back emptyhanded,' and they turned away up the garden again together.

The flyman watched their retreating figures until they were lost to sight, and then shifted into a more comfortable position on his seat, wagging his head profoundly, for he imagined he knew a thing or two. He would have liked to have some one to communicate his ideas to, but the maid had gone back into the house, and he had been left alone on the box to his own

reflections. He looked in front of him and yawned, not once or twice, but three times. The afternoon seemed to be growing warmer and warmer. The fly-horse, a venerable bay, was basking in the sunshine between the shafts, just sufficiently alive to his surroundings to remember at intervals to switch at the flies with a languid tail. The sight of the steed's reposeful back was sufficient in itself to provoke sleep; before the driver had watched the glossy surface for a minute his eyelids began to droop, and ere long his chin was on his chest and he was dozing peacefully.

A voice aroused him suddenly. He heard his own name uttered, and with a start gathered up the reins. How long he had been asleep he could not say, but he was aware that the young couple were again standing by his side; the same young couple that had walked

up the garden together a few minutes back,—and yet, strange to relate, not the same. To his drowsy eyes they were unchanged: it was not given him to perceive the new glad light in their faces; but it was there, that new glad light which for the moment seemed to transfigure them. Something had happened in the garden, while the driver sat dozing on his box, which had altered the whole world for the two who stood looking up at him.

'Barrett, we shall not want the fly this afternoon after all,' Ethel was saying in a clear ringing voice. 'Mr. Waring is not going back to town till to-morrow, so we want you to come round to take him to the station to-morrow instead of to-day, in time for the same train—you understand?—to-morrow.'

She punctuated her remarks by a succession of taps on a bundle of what looked like old letters that she held in her hand.

'Yes, Miss, I understand,' he said, and when Waring's bag had been lifted out shook the reins and drove mechanically away, while Ethel turned round and faced her companion.

'That's all right,' she said with a deep breath; and then for a space they stood and faced each other while the fly-wheels rumbled away in the distance. They were silent; words had suddenly grown for them almost a superfluity; they had so much in common now. When all was still again, save the bees and the birds and the ever-rippling leaves, they turned and passed up the drive side by side, still without a word.

Under the horse-chestnut tree they halted while Ethel picked a spray of blossom. She held it out to her companion. 'See, it is still in flower,' she said.

'So it is, still,' he made answer. He had seized hold of it, and of the hand that held it. 'What a time it has lasted! How long is it since you showed me that spike of flowers and I admired it so much? You remember, don't you? Four days, is it; five? I can hardly believe it.'

'Five days!' she exclaimed. 'Impossible! It feels like five months, five years. I have lived a lifetime since then.'

'Let's look upon it as a lifetime then,' he said, 'and start afresh from half an hour ago.'

'And you are not afraid?' she asked. They had strolled a little farther away from the house and had halted again.

'Afraid? Afraid of what?'

'Of taking me on trust like this, before I really know my own mind? It's a great risk. You remember what I said about,—about what I thought five days ago.'

'Five days! Five years, you mean,'

he laughed. 'Yes, yes, I know; you have told me everything; but, after all, I risk nothing more than you.'

- 'Nonsense! There's no risk for me. Don't I know you by this time? Haven't I had proofs of what you are ever since I first knew you?'
- 'That's only since November last,—not seven months yet.'
- 'But it's more than enough,' she said, 'to make me feel perfectly safe in trusting myself to you. But of me you know nothing,—except that I——'
- 'Except that you are willing to let yourself be taken on trust. Isn't that an honour for me?'
- 'But it's only on trust, you know.'
- 'Yes; I know. It's a good common-sense understanding to come to, and, after all, we have been through so much together we can afford to look at

things from a common-sense point of view, can't we?'

- 'I suppose so; but it's nothing more than on trust, you know.'
- 'I remember, and I want nothing more now.'
  - 'But you will want more later.'
- 'And don't you think it's just possible that I shall get it?' He had both her hands now and had fixed her with his grey eyes.

Hers dropped for a moment. 'I think so,' she murmured; 'but how can I tell? It is so soon still, so very soon.' But presently she raised her head again. 'And yet,' she said very softly, 'it seems so long ago,—I mean what went before—that I'm not sure that it will be so very, very difficult to,—to start afresh.'

'You would like to speak to Father directly he comes in, wouldn't you?' she said, after they had made the round of the garden. 'But, of course, he won't be back before tea-time. He will wonder why you haven't gone by the train you meant to.'

'I suppose he will. And that reminds me, I must send a telegram to my mother to tell her that my plans are altered.'

'Will you tell her why?'

'Not in the telegram, I think,' he made reply, smiling brightly into her eyes. 'I must speak to your father first.'

'Yes, I suppose you must,' she said. 'Will it be a surprise to them?' she asked after a pause, adding, 'I mean to your mother and sister.'

'A great surprise,' he answered gleefully.

'Had they no idea,—none whatever?' she pursued.

'Not the remotest,—I kept my feelings very close; it's a way I have,

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you know. I am pretty sure that nothing was farther from their thoughts. It will be a great surprise, a very great surprise.'

And, as in duty bound, she believed him.

THE END

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